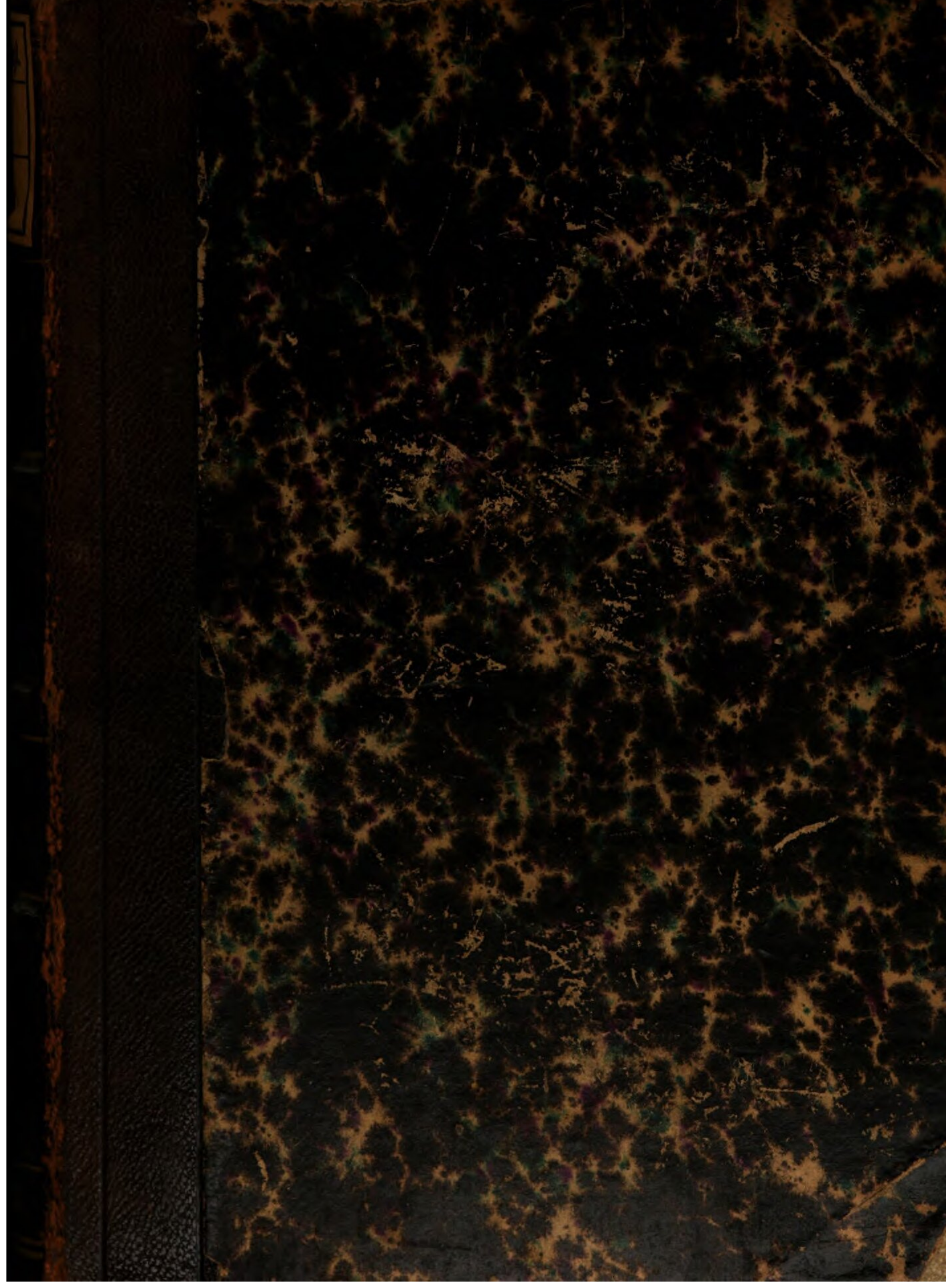




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LORD OAKBURN'S DAUGHTERS BY MRS. H. WOOD.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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LORD OAKBURN'S DAUGHTERS.

BY

MRS. HENRY WOOD,

AUTHOR OF "EAST LYNNE," "TREVLYN HOLD," ETC.

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IN TWO VOLUMES.

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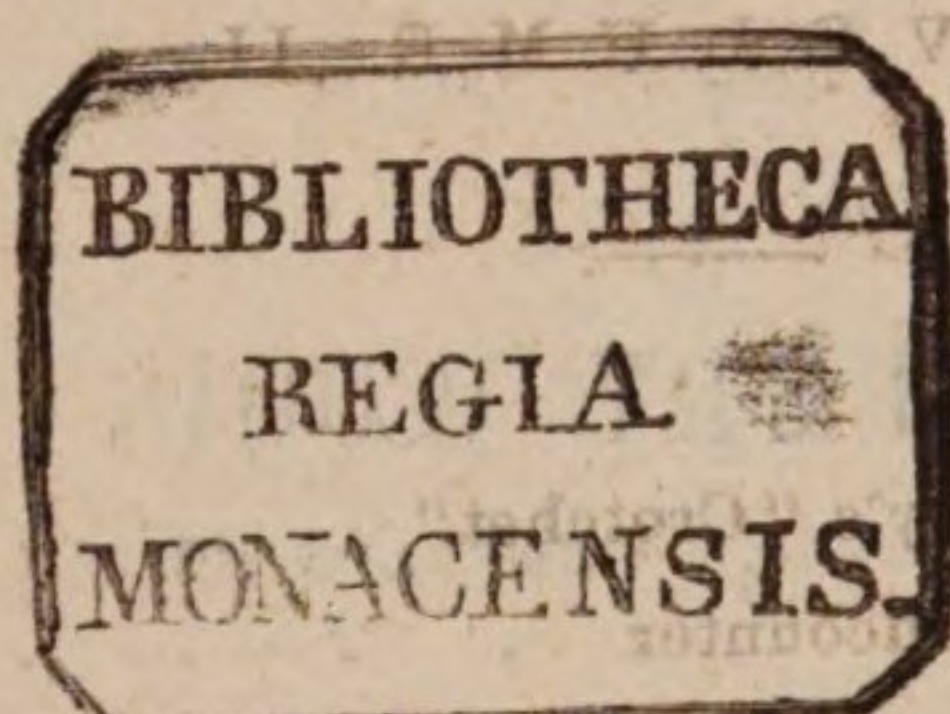
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LORD OAKBURN'S DAUGHTERS.

CHAPTER I.

Frederick Grey's "Crotchet."

THAT a strong tide, rolling from one end of South Wennock to the other, had set in against Mr. Stephen Grey, was a fact indisputable. Immediately subsequent to the inquest on Mrs. Crane, the tide of public opinion had set in *for* him; people seemed to feel ashamed of having suspected him of so fatal an error, and they made much of Mr. Stephen Grey. This prevailed for a week or two, and then the current changed. One insinuated a doubt, another insinuated a doubt; some said Mr. Stephen had been culpably careless; others said he had been tipsy. And the current against the surgeon went flowing on until it became as a rushing torrent, threatening to engulf him in its angry might.

Another indisputable fact was, that a great inciter to this feeling was Mr. Carlton. It was he who did the most towards fanning the flame. This was not generally known, for Mr. Carlton's work was partially effected in secret; but still it did in a measure ooze out, especially to the Greys. That Mr. Carlton's motive must be that of increasing his own practice, was universally assumed; but it was an underhand way of doing it, and it caused young Frederick Grey to boil over with indignation.

On a sofa in the house of Mr. Stephen Grey, lay a lady with a pale face and delicate features. It was Stephen Grey's wife. She had just returned home after seven or eight months' absence at the continental spas, whither she had gone with her sister, a wealthy widow, hoping to pick up renewed health; for she, Mrs. Grey, suffered always from an affection of the spine.

Frederick was bending over her. The boy loved nothing so much on earth as his mother. He was imparting to her all the wonders, pleasant and unpleasant, that had occurred during her absence; the tragedy which had taken place in Palace Street, and its present consequences to Mr. Stephen Grey, naturally forming the principal topic. This had not been written to Mrs. Grey. "As well not disturb her with disagreeable matters," Mr. Stephen had remarked at the time. She was growing excited over the recital, and she suddenly sat up, looking her son full in the face.

"I cannot understand, Frederick. Either your papa did put the opium into the mixture —"

"Prussic acid, mamma."

"Prussic acid! What put my thoughts upon opium? — talking of a sleeping draught, I suppose. Either your papa did put the prussic acid into the mixture, or he did not ——"

"Dearest mamma, do I not tell you that he did not? I watched him make it up; I watched every drop of everything he put into it. There was no more poison in that draught than there is in this glass of water at your elbow."

"My dear, I do not dispute it: I should be excessively astonished to hear that your papa had been

careless enough to do such a thing. What I want to know is this — with your testimony and your Uncle John's combined, with the experience of *years* that they have had in your father, and with the acquitting verdict of the coroner's jury, why have people got up this prejudice against him?"

"Because they are fools," logically answered Frederick. "I don't suppose there are ten people in the place who would call in papa now. It does make Uncle John so mad!"

"It must give him a great deal of extra work," observed Mrs. Stephen Grey.

"He is nearly worked off his legs. Some of our patients have gone over altogether to the enemy, Carlton. It is he who is the chief instigator against papa. And he does it in such a sneaking, mean way. 'I am grieved to be called in to take the place of Mr. Stephen Grey,' he says. 'No man can more highly respect him than I do, or deplore more deeply the lamentable mistake. I cannot but think he will be cautious for the future: still, when the lives of those dear to us, our wives and children, are at stake' —"

Mrs. Grey could not avoid an interrupting laugh, Frederick was imitating Mr. Carlton so quaintly.

"How do you know he says this to people?" she asked.

"Plenty of them could bear testimony to the fact, mamma. And it does its work all too well."

"And what is Mr. Carlton's motive?"

"To get our patients away from us, of course. Now that he has married an earl's daughter, he can't do with a small income. I wrote you word, you know, about his running away with Miss Laura Chesney.

They met with a series of disasters in the flight; were pitched out of Mr. Carlton's carriage into the mud, and Miss Laura lost one of her shoes. She's Lady Laura now — and was then, for that matter, if they had but known it: it's said that Mr. Carlton did know it. They got married at Gretna Green, or some of those convenient places; and when they came back to South Wennock were remarried again. You should have seen St. Mark's church! Crowds upon crowds pushed into it."

"And you amidst the rest, I suppose," remarked Mrs. Grey.

Frederick laughed. "Carlton was as white as a sheet, and kept looking round as if he feared some interruption. Bad men are always cowards. By the way, Lady Jane has come back to the house on the Rise."

"My boy, do you know I think you are too bitter against Mr. Carlton. It was not a right thing certainly to run away with a young lady, but that is not our affair; and it is very wrong to incite people against your papa — if he does do it; but, with all that, you are scarcely justified in calling him a bad man."

"Ah, but that's not all," said Frederick. "Mother, I hate Mr. Carlton! As to being bitter against him, I only wish I could be bitter; bitter to some purpose."

"Frederick!"

The boy half sank upon his knees to bring his face on a level with Mrs. Grey's, and lowered his voice to a whisper.

"I believe it was Mr. Carlton who put the prussic acid into the draught."

Mrs. Grey, startled to tremor, almost to anger, *frightened* at the temerity of Frederick, could only stare at him.

"Look here," he continued, in some excitement. "The draught went out of our house right, I *know*, and the boy delivered it as it was sent. Why then did Mr. Carlton take hold of it when it arrived, and call out that it smelt of prussic acid? It *could not* have smelt of prussic acid then; or, if it did, some magic had been at work."

Mrs. Grey knew how fond her son was of fancies, but she had never seen him so terribly earnest as this. She put up her hand to stop his words.

"It is of no use, mother; I must speak. This suspicion of Mr. Carlton fell upon me that night. When we heard of the death, I and Uncle John ran down to Palace Street. Carlton was in the chamber, and he began talking of what had taken place, and of his own share in the previous events of the evening: how he had smelt the draught on its being brought in, and his coming off to ask Mr. Stephen Grey whether it was all right, and then going home and making up a draught on his own account and not getting back with it in time. He told all this readily and glibly, and Uncle John and Mr. Lycett took it in for gospel; but I did not. A feeling suddenly came over me that he was acting a part. He was too frank, too voluble; it was exactly as though he were rehearsing a tale learnt by heart; and I declare that a conviction flashed into my mind that it was he who had done it all."

"You frighten me to faintness," gasped Mrs. Grey. "Have you reflected on what might be the awful conse-

quences to Mr. Carlton were such an accusation to get abroad?"

"I am not going to speak of it abroad; but, mother, I must tell *you*: it has been burning my heart away since that night. I dare not breathe it to papa or to Uncle John: they would call it one of my crotchety fancies, and say I was only fit for Bedlam. But *you* know how often you have been surprised at the quickness with which I read people and their motives, and you have called it a good gift from God. That Carlton was acting a part that night, I am certain; there was truth neither in his eye nor on his lip. He saw that I doubted him, too, and wanted to get me from the chamber. Well, that was the first phase in my suspicion; and the next was his manner at the inquest. The same glib, ready tale was on his tongue; he seemed to have all the story at his fingers' ends. The coroner complimented him on the straightforward way in which he gave his evidence; but I know that I read LIE in it from the beginning to the end."

"Answer me a question, Frederick. What has so prejudiced you against Mr. Carlton?"

"I was not previously prejudiced against him. I declare to you, mamma, that when I entered the chamber where the poor lady lay dead, I had not, and never had had, any prejudice against Mr. Carlton. I had felt rather glad that he set up in the place, because papa and Uncle John and Whittaker were so worried with the extent of the practice. It was when he was speaking of the draught that an inward conviction stole over me that he was speaking falsely, deceitfully, and that he knew more about it than he would say."

"I should call it an inward fiddlestick, were the subject less awfully serious," reproved Mrs. Grey. "It would be better for you to bring reason and common-sense to bear upon this, Frederick, than an 'inward conviction,' vague and visionary. Was this young lady not a stranger to Mr. Carlton?"

"I expect she was. To him as well as to us."

"Very well. What motive, then, could Mr. Carlton have had to work her ill? The very worst man permitted to live on earth would not poison a fellow-creature, and a stranger, for the sake of pastime; and Mr. Carlton is an educated man, a man of a certain refinement; and, so far as I have seen — for I met him two or three times before I left home — he is a pleasant and agreeable one. Assuming, for the moment's argument, that your views were correct, what *motive* could have actuated Mr. Carlton?"

Frederick Grey leaned his head on his hand. The question was a poser; in fact, it was the precise point that had puzzled him throughout. Judith Ford, the widow Gould, Mr. Stephen himself, had all testified that the lady had come to South Wennock a stranger to Mr. Carlton as to the Greys.

"I don't deny that that's a point difficult to get over, or that the case is completely shrouded in mystery," he confessed at length. "It puzzles me so that sometimes I can't sleep, and I get thinking that I must be wronging Carlton. I ask myself what he thought to gain by it. Nothing, that I can see. Of course he now keeps up the prejudice against papa to get his patients; but he could not have entered upon it from that motive —"

"For shame, Frederick!"

"Dear mamma, I am sorry you are so vexed, and I wish I had not mentioned it at all. I tell you I have lain awake night after night, thinking it over in all its aspects, and I see that any probable accession of practice could not have been his motive, for the draught might have been made up by me or by Mr. Whittaker, for all Mr. Carlton knew; and in that case the odium could not have touched papa. I see that you are angry with me, and I only wish I could put away this suspicion of Carlton from my mind. There is one loop-hole; that the man he saw concealed on the stairs may have been the villain, after all."

"What man? What stairs?" exclaimed Mrs. Grey, in astonishment.

"As Mr. Carlton was leaving the sick lady's room that same night, he saw — Hush! Here's papa!" cried the boy, breaking off abruptly. "Don't breathe a word of what I have been saying, there's a dear mother."

Mr. Stephen Grey came in, a gloomy cloud on his usually cheerful face. He threw himself in an arm-chair opposite his wife's sofa, his mood one of grievous weariness.

"Are you tired, Stephen?" she asked.

"Tired to death," he answered; "tired of it all. We shall have to make a move."

"A move!" she repeated, while Frederick turned round from the window, where he was now standing, and looked at his father.

"We must move from this place, Mary, to one where the gossip of Stephen Grey's having supplied poison in mistake for safe medicine will not have penetrated. It gets worse every day, and John's

temper is tried. No wonder: he is worked like a horse. Just now he came in, jaded and tired, and found three messengers waiting to see him, ready to squabble amid themselves who should get him first. 'I am really unable to go,' he said. 'I have been with a patient for the last seven hours, and am fit for nothing. Mr. Stephen will attend.' No, there was not one would have Mr. Stephen: their orders were, Mr. Grey or nobody. John is gone, unfit as he is: but this sort of thing cannot last."

"Of course it cannot," said Mrs. Stephen Grey. "How extraordinary it is! Why should people be prejudiced in the face of facts?"

"I had a talk with John yesterday, and broached to him what has been in my own mind for weeks. He and I must part. John must take a partner who will be more palatable to South Wennock than I now am, and I must try my fortune elsewhere. If I am ruined myself, it is of no use dragging John down with me; and, were I to stay with him, I believe the whole practice would take itself away."

Mrs. Grey's heart sank within her. Can any one wonder? — hearing that her home of years must be broken up. "Where could we go?" she cried, in agitation.

"I don't know. Perhaps London would be best. There, a person does not know his next-door neighbour, and nobody will know me as the unfortunate practitioner from South Wennock."

"It is a great misfortune to have fallen upon us!" she murmured.

"It is unmerited," returned Stephen Grey; "that's my great consolation. God knows how innocent I was

in that unhappy business, and I trust He will help me to get a living elsewhere. It's possible that it may turn out for the best in the end."

"What man was it that Mr. Carlton saw on the stairs that night?" inquired Mrs. Grey, after a pause, her thoughts reverting, in spite of herself, from their own troubles. And Frederick, as he heard the question, glanced uneasily at his mother, lest she should be about to betray confidence.

"Nobody can tell. And Carlton fancied afterwards that he might have been mistaken — that the moonlight deceived him. But there's not the least doubt some one *was* there, concealing himself, and I and John have privately urged it upon the police never to cease their search after him. That man was the guilty agent."

"You think so?" cried Mrs. Stephen, after an awe-struck pause.

"I feel sure of it. No reasonable being can entertain a doubt of it. But for this mistaken idea that people have picked up — that the mistake was mine in mixing the sleeping draught — there would not be two opinions upon it in the town. The only point I cannot understand, is — Carlton's having smelt the poison in the draught when it was delivered; but I can only come to the conclusion that Carlton was mistaken, unaccountable as it seems for him to have fancied a smell where no smell was."

"How full of mystery it all sounds!"

"The affair is a mystery altogether; it's nothing but mystery from beginning to end. Of course the conclusion drawn is — and the coroner was the first to draw it — that that man was the ill-fated young lady's

husband, stolen into the house for the purpose of deliberately destroying her. If so, we may rest satisfied that it will be cleared up sometime, for murder is safe to come out, sooner or later."

As Stephen Grey concluded the last words he quitted the room. Mrs. Grey rose and approached her son.

"My dear, you hear what your papa says. How is it possible that you can suffer your suspicions to stray to any other than that concealed man?"

The boy turned, and wound his mother's arm about him as he answered, his frank, earnest eyes lifted trustingly to hers.

"I am just puzzled to death over it, mother mine. I don't feel a doubt that some wicked fellow was there; I can't doubt it; and of course he was not there for good. Still, I cannot overget that impression of falseness made upon me by Mr. Carlton. There is such a thing as bribery, you know."

"Bribery!" repeated Mrs. Grey, not understanding his drift.

"If Carlton did not commit the ill himself, he may be keeping the counsel of that man who did. Mother dear, don't take your arm from me in anger. I *can't* drive the feeling away from me. Mr. Carlton may not have been the actual culprit; but, that he knows more of the matter than he suffers to appear, I am as certain of as that I am in life."

And Mrs. Stephen Grey shivered within her as she listened to the words, terrified for the consequences should they come to be overheard.

"Frederick, this is one of your crotchets. Be still; be still!"

CHAPTER II.

An Unlucky Encounter.

RECLINING languidly in her easy chair one bright afternoon, was Lady Jane Chesney. The reaction of the passionate excitement, arising from the blow dealt out to her so suddenly, had come, and she felt utterly weary both in mind and body. Some little bustle and talking outside was heard, as if a visitor had entered, and then the room door opened. There stood Laura Carlton.

"Well, Jane! I suppose I may dare to come in?"

She spoke in a half laughing, half deprecating tone, and looked out daringly at Jane from her dazzling beauty. A damask colour shone in her cheek, a brilliant light in her eye. She wore a rich silk dress with brocaded flounces, and a white lace bonnet all gossamer and prettiness. Jane retained her hand as she gazed at her.

"You are happy, Laura?"

"Oh, so happy!" was the echoed answer. "But I want to be reconciled to you all. Papa is dreadfully obstinate when he is crossed, I know that; but he need not hold out so long. And you, Jane, to have been here going on for a fortnight, and not to have taken notice of me!"

"I have been ill," said Jane.

"Oh, I daresay! I suppose the fact is, papa forbade you to call at my house, or to receive me here."

"No, he did not. But let us come to a thorough understanding at once, Laura, as you are here: it may spare trouble to both of us; perhaps some heart-burn-

ing. I must decline, myself, to visit at your house. I will receive you here with pleasure, and be happy to see you whenever you like to come: but I cannot receive Mr. Carlton."

"Why will you not visit at my house?"

"Because it is Mr. Carlton's. I would prefer not to meet him — anywhere."

Laura's resentment bubbled up. "Is your prejudice against Mr. Carlton to last for ever?"

"I cannot say. I confess that it is strong against him at present. I never liked him, Laura; and his underhand conduct with regard to you has not tended to soften the dislike. I cannot extend my hand in greeting to Mr. Carlton. It is altogether better that we should not meet. Like him, I never can."

"And never will, so long as you persist in shutting yourself out from all intercourse with him," retorted Laura. "What! would it hurt you, Jane, to meet my husband?"

"We will drop the subject," said Jane. "To pursue it would be productive of no end. When I tell you that my own feelings (call them prejudices if you will) forbid me to see Mr. Carlton, I tell you truth. And some deference is due to the feelings of my father. I will not reproach you, Laura, for the step you took: the time has gone by for that; but you must not ask me to countenance Mr. Carlton."

"You speak of deference to papa's feelings, Jane! I don't think he showed much to yours. What a simpleton he has made of himself!"

Jane Chesney's face burnt with a sudden glow, and her drooping eyelids were not raised. The old spirit, always ready to uphold her father, whether he

was right or whether he was wrong, had gone out of her crushed heart for ever.

"What sort of a woman is she?" resumed Laura.

"O, Laura, what matters it?" Jane answered in a tone that betrayed how full of pain was the subject. "He has married her, and that is enough. I cannot talk of it."

"Why did you not bring away Lucy?"

"I was not permitted to bring her."

"And do you mean to say that you shall live here, all by yourself?"

"Whom have I to live with? I may as well occupy this house as any other. My means will afford nothing better. *That* I do not repine at; it is good enough for me; and to be able to live at peace in it is a great improvement upon the embarrassment we used to undergo."

"But it is so lonely an existence for you! It seems like isolation."

Jane was silent. The sense of her lonely lot was all too present to her as her sister spoke: but she knew that she must *bear*.

"How much are you to be allowed, Jane?"

"Five hundred a year."

"Five hundred a year for the Lady Jane Chesney!" returned Laura with flashing eyes. "It is not half enough, Jane."

"It is enough for comfort. And grandeur I have done with. May I express a hope, Laura, that you find your income adequate to your expectations," she added in a spirit of kindness.

Laura's colour deepened. Laura was learning to estimate herself by her new standard, as the Earl of

Oakburn's daughter; she was longing for the display and luxury that rank generally gives. But Mr. Carlton's father had not come forward with money; and they had to content themselves with what Mr. Carlton made by his profession: he had been compelled to tell his wife she must practise economy; and every hour of the day Laura caught herself wishing for a thousand and one articles that only wealth can purchase. Her vanity had certainly not lessened with the accession to her title.

"I think it shameful of papa not to allow me an income, now that he enjoys the Chesney estates, or else present my husband with an adequate sum of ready money," exclaimed Laura, in a resentful tone. "Mr. Carlton, I am sure, feels the injustice, though he does not speak of it."

"Injustice!" interrupted Jane, with marked emphasis.

"Yes, it is unjust; shamefully unjust. What was my offence? — that I chose the husband he would have denied me. And now look at what he has done! — married a woman obnoxious to us all. If it was derogatory for Miss Laura Chesney to choose a surgeon when she had not a cross or a coin to bless herself with, I wonder what it is for the Earl of Oakburn, the peer, to lower himself to his daughter's governess?"

Jane made no reply. There was some logic in Laura's reasoning; although she appeared to ignore the fact that she owed obedience to her father, and had forfeited it.

"You were devoted to him, Jane, and how has he repaid you? Just done that which has driven you

from his home. He has driven you with as little compunction, I dare say, as he would drive a dog — Jane, be quiet; I will say what I have to say. He has got his new lady, and much value you and I are to him henceforth!”

“You are wrong, Laura,” Jane answered with emotion. “I came away with my own free will when he would have kept me. He — but I — I — cannot bear to speak of it. I do not defend his marriage; but he is not the first man who has been led away by a designing woman.”

“He is a hard man,” persisted Laura, working herself into a state of semi-fury; “he is heartless as the grave. Why else has he not forgiven Clarice?”

“Clarice! He has forgiven her.”

“Has he!” returned Laura, upon whom the words acted as a sudden check. “She is not at home. I am sure she’s not!”

Jane dropped her voice, “We cannot find Clarice, Laura.”

“Not find Clarice! What do you mean?”

“Simply what I say: we cannot find her. I sought out the situation she was at in Gloucester Terrace, — in fact, she was at two situations there, one after the other, but she did not remain long at either. She quitted the last of them a twelvemonth ago last June, and no trace of her since then can be discovered. Our only conjecture is, that she must have gone on the Continent with some family, or elsewhere abroad. Papa has caused the lists of passports at the most frequented ports to be searched, but without success; but that we think little of, as she may have been entered as ‘the governess.’ In short, we have searched

for her in all ways, and the police have searched; and we can hear nothing of her. The uneasiness this gives me, Laura, I cannot express to you; and papa — in spite of your opinion of his heartlessness — is as much troubled as I am."

"I never heard of such a thing," exclaimed Laura, when her astonishment allowed her to speak. "Not find Clarice!"

In her eagerness she reiterated question upon question, and Jane told her all the particulars she had been able to glean. They were with difficulty received.

"Nothing at all has been heard of her since last June — that is, June twelvemonth?" repeated Laura. "But Jane, you had letters from her subsequent to that?"

"I know I had; one: but it gave me no clue to where she was. It was the letter that came to us last New Year's day, to wish us the *bonne année*."

"That was not the last letter you had from her?"

"Yes, it was. I wrote three letters to her subsequent to that, the letters that I afterwards found lying at the library, unclaimed. Do you recollect my telling you of a very singular dream I had, relating to Clarice — a disagreeable dream?"

"I recollect your *not* telling me," replied Laura. "You said you had a dream that troubled you, but you would not tell it, fearing my ridicule."

"Yes," said Jane: "it was in March. The dream made me very uneasy, and I wrote, as I tell you, more than once to Clarice, begging tidings of her. They were the letters I speak of. Every phase of that dream is as vivid to my mind now as it was then."

There are moments when the superstition is all too strong upon me that it only shadowed forth the reality of Clarice's fate. I seem to *know* that we shall never find her — in life."

Laura would have liked to ridicule then. "Can't you tell me the dream, Jane?"

"No," shuddered Jane, "I cannot tell it. Least of all to you."

Laura became curious. "Why least of all to me?"

"Because — because — in the same dream, mixed up with Clarice, mixed up with the horror — but, I am foolish, I think," broke off Jane. "I shall say no more about it, Laura."

Laura did not care. She had been in the habit of laughing at Jane's dreams, and she would laugh still. Jane Chesney had certainly had two or three most singular dreams, which had borne reference in a remarkable degree to subsequent realities of life. One of them had foreshadowed her mother's death, and Jane had told it before the death took place. That the events following upon and bearing out the dreams were singular coincidences, can at least be said. And yet Jane Chesney was not by nature inclined to superstition, but the dreams had, in a degree, forced it upon her. She buried the feeling within herself, as we all like to bury those feelings which touch wholly on the imagination — that inner life within the life. But of all her dreams, never had she been visited by one bearing half the vivid horror, the horror of *reality*, as did this last one relating to her sister Clarice.

"It is very deceitful of you, Jane, to persist to

my face that you have not heard from Clarice since the new year," resumed Laura.

Jane raised her eyelids. "I have not heard from her since."

"Where's the use of saying it, Jane?" and Laura's voice took a peevish tone, for she had as much dislike to be kept in the dark as had her father the earl. "You know quite well that you had at least one letter subsequent to that, and a most affectionate and loving one."

Jane was surprised. "I do not know what your head is running on, Laura, but I do know that I never had a line or syllable from Clarice subsequent to that January letter."

Laura took out her purse, a handsome portemonnaie, the gift of Mr. Carlton, and extracted from it a small piece of paper that had once formed part of a letter.

"Look there, Jane. You know Clarice's writing: is that hers or not? I put it in my purse to-day to bring to you."

"Oh yes, it is Clarice's writing," said Jane, the instant it was in her hands. It was the upper part of the first page, where the writing commenced, and was dated from London on the 28th of the previous February. It began as follows: —

"My dearest, I am about to make a proposal to you, and ——"

Then the paper was torn. On the reverse side was the conclusion of the note, which had apparently been a short one.

"—— without delay. Ever your own Clarice."

Jane Chesney pondered over the words, especially

over the date. But she had never seen the note in her life before, and said so.

"Nonsense," said Laura. "If it was not addressed to you, Jane, to whom was it addressed? Clarice never wrote home to anybody but you since her departure."

"How did you become possessed of this?" inquired Jane.

"It came from home with my clothes."

"Impossible," said Jane. "I collected your things myself and packed them. There was no such scrap of paper, as this, amongst them."

"I tell you, Jane, it came to me in my box of clothes. Some little time ago a pair of my lace sleeves got mislaid. I was angry with my maid, and turned the drawer, where my lace things are kept, out upon the floor. In picking them up to replace, I found the paper. That it had come from home with my lace things is certain, for they were emptied straight from the trunk into that drawer. And there it must have remained since unnoticed, probably slipped under the paper laid at the bottom of the drawer."

"It appears to me inexplicable," returned Jane. "I know that I never received the note; and, as you say, Clarice wrote home only to me. But she never worded her letters in that strain: it is more as a wife would write to her husband."

"The display of affection struck me," said Laura, "I thought she had grown over-fond all on a sudden."

"Clarice has too much good sense to indulge in foolishly fond expressions," said Jane. "I cannot understand this," she resumed. "It seems all on a par

with the rest, full of nothing but mystery. Will you give me this scrap of paper, Laura?"

"You may keep it, and welcome. I hope we shall soon hear of her. It is so dreadfully inconsistent for Lady Clarice Chesney, or Lady anybody else, to be getting her living as a governess. But I suppose she cannot have heard of the change. Jane — to alter the subject — do you know that I saw papa at Pembury?"

"No."

"I did. I was visiting Colonel and Mrs. Marden, they are such nice people — but you know them for yourself. I was driving through the street in the pony carriage with Mrs. Marden, and we met Sir James's mail-cart, he and papa inside it. Between astonishment and fear I was nearly frightened out of my wits. I pulled the reins and started the ponies off, and the next day we heard that papa had left again."

"Are you going?" asked Jane, for Laura had risen.

"I must be going now. I shall come in again soon, for I have not said half I thought to say, or remembered half the questions. Good-by, Jane; come with me as far as the gate."

"I don't feel well enough to go out," was Jane's answer.

"Nonsense, that's all fancy. A minute's walk in this bright sunshine will do you good."

Jane yielded to the persuasion. She muffled herself up and accompanied Laura to the gate. It was a balmy autumn day, the sun brilliant, and the red leaves shining in the foliage. Jane really did feel the air revive her, and she did not hasten indoors immediately.

Laura shook hands and proceeded down the road. Just after she had passed its bend, she encountered her husband. He was advancing at a quick step, swinging a cane in his hand.

"Oh, Lewis, were you coming in search of me?"

"Not I," said Mr. Carlton, laughing. "It would take I don't know what amount of moral courage to venture into the precincts of my enemy, Lady Jane. Has it been a stormy interview, Laura?"

"It has been a pleasant one. Not that Jane is a model of suavity in all things. She tells me I may go and see her whenever I please, but you are not to go; and she won't come to my house."

"Then I'd retaliate, Laura, by not going to hers."

"Oh, I don't know," was Laura's careless answer; "I should like to go to her sometimes, and I dare say she'll come round after a while. Won't you walk home with me, Lewis?"

"I cannot, my dearest. A patient is waiting for me."

"Who is it?"

"A farmer's wife: nobody you know. She is very ill."

They parted different ways. Laura went towards home, and Mr. Carlton continued his road up the Rise. As he passed the bend, he became aware that some one was advancing from an opposite direction, and recognised young Frederick Grey. And Master Frederick was in a fiery temper.

A word of explanation as to its cause is necessary. At the Michaelmas just passed, a Mr. Thrupp and his wife, people from a distance, had come to live at a small farm just beyond the Rise. A short time after

taking possession, the wife was seized with illness, and Mr. Carlton was called in. The farmer knew nothing and had heard nothing of the merits of the different practitioners of the place, but Mr. Carlton lived nearest to him, and therefore he was summoned.

Mr. Carlton obeyed the call: but the case assumed an alarming aspect, and after a few days he suggested that another doctor should meet him in consultation, and mentioned Mr. John Grey. The farmer, Mr. Thrupp, went to the Greys' residence, to request Mr. John's attendance early on the following morning. Mr. John was out, but Mr. Stephen was in; and the farmer knowing nothing of the prejudice against the latter, arranged that he should go instead of his brother. Mr. Carlton was considerably surprised to meet *him*; he said nothing in his presence, but he remained to say it after Mr. Stephen had departed. This was on the morning of the day when Lady Laura made her call upon her sister. Mr. Carlton was now on his way to the farm, unconscious that Frederick Grey, bearing down upon him, had just left it.

In point of fact, Frederick had been sent up by his father to inquire the result of certain remedies ordered at the consultation. On the boy's arrival there the farmer came out to speak with him.

"You are perhaps a relation of the Mr. Greys', sir?" said he, after replying to the inquiries of Frederick.

"I am Mr. Stephen Grey's son. Why?"

Mr. Thrupp, a simple-looking man, scratched his head.

"Then perhaps you'll be good enough to say, sir, that we'd rather the gentleman didn't come again," he

resumed, bringing the words out with hesitation, for he did not much like to speak them. "It has so flustered my wife to hear that he sometimes sends out poison by mistake in his physic bottles, that his visit has done her more harm than good. She is a trifle better, and she thinks Dr. Carlton can get her round now by himself. If you'll be just good enough to say so, sir, to Mr. Stephen Grey, with our thanks for his visit of this morning."

The indignant red dyed Frederick Grey's features. "Who in the world told you that calumny of my father?" he asked.

"No offence, sir," returned the farmer, civilly; "I'm sure I don't intend any, personally, for we know nothing but what we hear. After the gentleman had left, the other one, Dr. Carlton, asked how we could think of calling him into the house; he said it might cost us our lives some time, for he was not particular as to the making up of his medicines, and one lady had died through it. The other brother, Mr. John, was quite a reliable gentleman, he said, and it was him he had told me to call in. I asked my next door neighbour whether it was true, and he said it was true that a lady did die after taking some physic sent by him. It gave my wife such a turn, sir, that we feared she was going — and perhaps you'll please tell him, not meaning any offence, that we'd rather he didn't come again."

Frederick Grey quitted the farmer, his blood rising up against the injustice done his father, against the malice (as he regarded it) of Mr. Carlton. It was on returning from this very unsatisfactory interview, and when Master Frederick was in this very unsatisfactory

temper, that the two unhappily came in contact, meeting exactly opposite the gate of Lady Jane Chesney.

Lady Jane might be called a third party at the meeting. She had taken a turn on the path after the departure of Laura, and on nearing the gate again heard footsteps in the road, and looked out incidentally; there was Mr. Carlton close to her on the one side and Stephen Grey's son on the other. Not caring to be so much as seen by the surgeon, she stepped aside behind the hedge until he should have passed.

But they were not to pass so soon. Mr. Carlton was striding on with a half indifferent, half supercilious nod to the boy, when the latter, bold, fearless, and angry, placed himself right in his path.

"Don't brush by me so quickly, if you please, Mr. Carlton. I'll thank you to explain first what it is you have been saying at Thrupp's farm about my father."

Mr. Carlton stared at him, stared more especially at the address; and the supercilious expression deepened on his countenance.

"You are in a passion, I should think, young sir," was the answer, delivered with stinging blandness. "I and Mr. Stephen Grey can settle our own affairs without your aid."

The tone turned Frederick half mad, and he forgot his prudence. "You are a wicked, designing man," he burst forth. "You have been working in an underhand manner to drive my father from the place; not a day passes but you are secretly traducing him. Why don't you do it openly to his face, Mr. Carlton? Why do you do it behind his back, when he can't defend himself?"

"I don't know what you mean," said Mr. Carlton. "Stand aside, and let me pass."

"You do know what I mean," retorted the boy, keeping his place before Mr. Carlton, so that the surgeon could not pass. "He met you in consultation at Thrupp's this morning, and the moment his back was turned you set on to prejudice their minds against him; saying he was in the habit of sending out poisoned medicines, and it frightened the woman so, that they will not have him again. And this has been your game for months. How dare you continue to assert that my father poisoned the draught that night, when you know he did not? When you *know* it, I say!"

Mr. Carlton lifted his cane menacingly. "But for the respect I bear your uncle, as my brother practitioner, and your father also, in spite of the error he committed, I would lay this about your shoulders, young gentleman, and teach you better manners."

Master Frederick's passion was not calmed by the threat, and it may be questioned if he even knew in that wild moment the danger of the words he was about to utter.

"You know, I say, that Mr. Stephen Grey did *not* commit the error. You know that it was *you* who dropped the poison into the draught when you were alone with it after it was delivered. Keep your cane off me, Mr. Carlton; blows will not mend murder. If it was not you, it was that villain you saw on the stairs, and you, perhaps by bribery, undertook to keep his counsel and turn suspicion off him. You saw that I suspected you the very night it was done; you saw that I suspected you when you were giving your

plausible evidence at the inquest. What the poor young lady had done to you, you best know, but I believe in my true heart, and I tell it you with God hearing me, that you were guilty either of killing her, or of screening that man who did do it. Now, go and talk about my father, Mr. Carlton."

It was only by dint of the most ingenious dodging that Frederick Grey had been able to accomplish his say, but Mr. Carlton caught him now. The cane came down on his shoulders; and Frederick, passion giving him the strength of a young lion, seized it and broke it. Mr. Carlton walked away, leaving a careless and scornful epithet behind him; and the boy leaned against the gate to recover breath and equanimity.

A tap on the shoulder, and Frederick turned. There stood Lady Jane Chesney. He raised his hat, and she could not help being struck with the nobility of the glowing countenance, the fearless truth of the large grey eyes.

"Master Grey, do you know that I have heard every syllable you said to Mr. Carlton? Surely you do not believe in your own accusation? It must have had its rise only in the heat of passion?"

"Lady Jane — I beg your pardon — I am sorry you heard this — I hope you do not think me capable of making such an accusation *not* believing it. I do believe it; I have believed it ever since the night. Not that I have any grounds, or what might be called reason for believing it," he hastily added. "It is but an instinct within. I am sure Mr. Carlton knows in some way more about it than he will say. I think he must have been bribed by the man."

"Do you remember that — although we are at

variance and I do not like him — he is my brother-in-law?"

"Yes. I am very sorry that you heard what passed," he repeated. "Perhaps, Lady Jane, you will be kind enough to let it be as though you had not heard it?"

"I will," said Lady Jane; "and in return allow me to recommend you not to give utterance to sentiments so dangerous. My opinion is that you are totally wrong in your fancy, and that prejudice against Mr. Carlton has led you into the error. It is impossible to believe otherwise. Some men — I do not know that Mr. Carlton is one — would bring you before the law for this, and make you prove your words, or punish you if you could not. Be more discreet in future."

"Thank you," he answered, his sunny smile returning to him; "it is a bargain, Lady Jane. I was in a dreadful passion, there's no denying it, and I did say more than I ought. Thank you very much."

And replacing his hat, for he had stood bareheaded during the interview, Frederick Grey vaulted away, flinging the pieces of cane from him as he ran. Lady Jane stood looking after him.

"A noble spirit, I'm sure," she murmured, "in spite of his hairbrained words. I wonder if Mr. Carlton will bring him to punishment for them. I should, were so unjustifiable an accusation made against me. Boys will be boys."

CHAPTER III.

An Old Enemy come back again.

So Stephen Grey could not struggle with the fate which seemed to be working against him, and he quitted his home of years, and betook himself to London. John Grey found a suitable partner in Mr. Charles Lycett, the brother of the curate of St. Mark's, who was seeking a practice for himself, and Frederick Grey remained with his uncle in South Wennock to pursue his medical studies.

Mr. John Grey's advice to his brother was: — Establish yourself *well* wherever you settle down, whether in London or elsewhere. Spend money in doing so, and the probability is that you will get it returned to you with interest; but if you begin in a little poking, niggardly way, it's ten chances to one if you ever get on." Stephen took the advice; and circumstances favoured him. At the very time of his removal to London, a physician died suddenly in Savile Row. Stephen Grey stepped in, secured the lease of the house at the cost of a trifling outlay, and the practice came flowing in almost without exertion or solicitation on his part. Then he took his degree: and in a few months after he had quitted South Wennock, he found he was gaining a much larger income than he and his brother had counted together.

Nearly a twelvemonth elapsed subsequent to the return of Lady Jane Chesney to South Wennock, and September was come round again. The past year had brought little of event in its wake. An infant, born to Lady Laura Carlton, had died at its birth, and she was one of the gay South Wennock world again. Mr.

Carlton's practice was a very good one now, for fresh people were ever coming to the new buildings springing up around South Wennock, and he was obliged to take an assistant. No further tilt at arms had occurred between him and Frederick Grey. He had, perhaps wisely, overlooked the boy's dangerous insolence; and since then they had passed each other in the street without speaking. Frederick Grey's dislike of Mr. Carlton was made a sort of joke of in the Grey family; none of them (save his mother, and she was away now) knew its origin; and South Wennock set the dislike down to Mr. Carlton's somewhat underhand conduct to Stephen Grey.

Thus nearly a twelvemonth rolled on with but little to mark it.

On the grand bed of state which Jane Chesney had lovingly chosen for her father when the newly-taken house was being furnished in Portland Place, lay Eliza, Countess of Oakburn, an infant cradled by her side. There is an old saying "After a wedding comes a burying;" but it more frequently happens that after a wedding comes a christening. Buryings, however, do follow all too surely when their turn comes, and one was not far off that house now.

There had been as little of event to mark the past twelvemonth in the Earl of Oakburn's house, as there had been in South Wennock. Lady Oakburn had made him a good wife; she had been as solicitous for his comforts as Jane could have been. She made an excellent mistress of his household, a judicious and kind step-mother to Lucy, and the little girl had learnt to love her.

But all her anxious care had not been able to keep

the earl's old enemy from him — gout. He lay in the room above, suffering under an aggravated attack; an attack which threatened danger.

Two days only had the little fellow in the cradle by the countess's bed seen the light; he was the young heir to Oakburn. Lucy Chesney sat near, touching now and again the wonderful little red face as she talked to her step-mother.

"It is very good of you to let me come in, mamma. What shall his name be?" They were thinking of the christening, you see.

"Francis, of course, Lucy."

"But I have heard papa say that the heir to Oakburn should be John. It has been — oh, for ages, 'John, Earl of Oakburn.'"

"Papa shall decide, dear."

"We can't ask him to-day, he is so much worse. He —"

"Worse?" echoed the countess, in a startled tone, whilst an attendant, sitting in the room, raised her finger with a warning gesture.

Lucy coloured with contrition; she saw that she had said more than she ought.

"Nurse, you told me the earl was better this morning!"

The woman rose. "My lady, there was not much difference; he was better, if anything," she responded, endeavouring to put all evasion from her voice. "My lord is in pain, and that's why Lady Lucy may call him worse; but it is in the nature of gout to be painful."

"Lucy, tell me the truth. I ask you in your father's name. I see that he is worse, and they are keeping it from me. How much worse?"

Lucy stood in distress, not knowing what to do; blaming herself for her incaution. The eyes of fear are quick, and Lady Oakburn saw her dilemma.

"Child," she continued, her emotion rising, "you remember the day, three months ago, when your papa was thrown from his horse in the park, and they sent on here an obscure account of the accident, so that we could not tell whether he was much or little hurt, whether he was alive or dead? Do you recollect that hour? — the dreadful suspense? — how we prayed to know the worst, rather than to be kept in it?"

"Oh, mamma," interrupted Lucy, placing her hand on her eyes, as if she would shut out some unwelcome sight, "do not talk of it. I never could bear to think of it, but that papa came home, after all, only a little bruised. That *was* suspense!"

"Lucy, dear child, you are keeping me in the same now," spoke the countess. "I cannot bear it; I can bear the certain evil, but not the suspense. Now tell me the truth."

Lucy thought she saw her way plain before her; anything was better than suspense, now that fear had been alarmed.

"I will tell you all I know, mamma. Papa is worse, but I do not think he is so much worse as to cause uneasiness. I have often known him in as much pain as this, before — before" — Lucy in her delicacy of feeling scarcely knew how to word the phrase — "before you came here."

"Lucy, should your papa become worse, and danger supervene, you will let me know. Mind! I rely upon you. No" — for Lucy was drawing away her hand — "you cannot go until you have promised."

"I do promise, mamma," was Lucy's honest answer. And Lady Oakburn heaved a relieved sigh.

Of course the nurse had now to plot and plan to counteract this promise, and she sought Miss Snow. For Miss Snow was in the house still, Lucy's governess. Lord Oakburn had not allowed his wife to take the full charge of Lucy's education, so Miss Snow was retained: but the countess superintended all.

"My Lady Lucy must not be let know that his lordship is in danger, miss," grumbled the nurse. "She comes tattling everything to my lady, and it won't do. A pretty thing to have *her* worried!" she concluded, indignantly.

"Is the earl in danger?" quickly asked Miss Snow.

"He's in awful pain, if that's danger," was the answer. "I'm not a sick nurse, miss; only a monthly: but if ever I saw gout in the stomach, he has got it."

"Why that is certain death," uttered Miss Snow, in an accent of alarm.

"Oh, no, it's not; not always. The worst sign, they say, is that all my lord's snappishness is gone out of him!"

"Who says so? Who says it is?"

"The attendants. That black fellow does nothing but stand behind the bed and cry and sob. He'd like his master to rave at him as is customary. But you'll keep things dark from Lady Lucy, please. I'll speak to the servants."

Miss Snow nodded, and the nurse warned the rest of the house, and took her way back to Lady Oakburn's chamber.

The day closed; the night drew on, and the earl's state was an ominous one. Agonies of pain, awful

pain, lasted him throughout it: and but for the well-built walls and floors, Lady Oakburn must have heard the groans.

With the morning he was calmer, easier; nevertheless, three physicians went in to him. The two in regular attendance had sent for another.

"The ship's sinking," said the earl to them. "No more splicing of the timbers; they are rotten, and won't bear it."

The earl was right, and the doctors knew it; but they would not admit to him, in so many words, that he was dying. The earl, in his blunt way, blunt still, told them of their craftiness.

"It's all in your day's work to go about deceiving people," cried he; "telling them they are getting their sea-legs on again, while all the while you know that before the next eight bells strike they'll be gone down to Davy Jones's locker. It may be the right sort of steering for some patients, delicate women and children, perhaps, but it's not for me, and you are a long way out of your reckoning."

The earl's voice grew faint. They administered some drops in a glass, and wiped his brow.

"I am an old sailor, sirs," he continued, "and I have turned into my hammock night after night for the best part of my life, knowing there was but a plank between me and eternity. D'ye think, then, I have not *learnt* to face death — that you should be afraid to acknowledge it to me, now it's come? If I had not made up my accounts for my Maker before, there wouldn't be much time to do it now. I have been headstrong and irritable, giving my tongue the reins, but the Great Commander knows that poor Jack Tar

acquires that in his hard life at sea. He looks to the heart, and He is merciful to a slip word or two. Pompey!"

The man came forward and threw himself by the bedside; his whole attitude expressing the keenest grief and love.

"Pompey, tell them, though I have made you fly at my voice, whether I have been a bad master. What sort of a master have I been?"

Poor Pompey! his wailing sobs nearly choked him as he knelt and covered the earl's hand with his tears and kisses.

"Never a better massa! never a better massa! Pompey like to go with him."

"You'd keep it from me that my voyage is run, sirs! We seamen have got a Saviour as well as you. He chose fishermen for his friends; d'ye think, then, he'd reject a poor knocked-about sailor, who goes to him with his hat in his hand and lays his sins at his feet? No! He'll steer our boat through the last quicksands, and be on shore to receive us, as he once received his own fishermen, and had a fire of coals ready for them, and fish laid thereon, and bread. And that was after he had suffered! Never you be backward again in telling a tired sailor that he's nearing the port. Shall I last the day out?"

More than that, they thought.

"One of you will send a despatch for my daughter, and — I suppose my wife cannot come to me."

The medical attendant of Lady Oakburn was in the room, one of those round the earl, and he pronounced it "Impossible." Neither must her ladyship be suffered to know of the danger, he added: for a

day or two at all events it must be kept from her, or he would not answer for the consequences. The young Lady Lucy must not be allowed to learn it, or she would carry the tidings.

The earl listened, and nodded his head. Very good, he said. And he dictated a message to his daughter Jane.

As the medical men went out they encountered Lucy. She was sitting on the stairs waiting for them, deeply anxious. The summoning of the third doctor had caused commotion in the house, and Lucy did not know what to think. Gliding up to the one who attended Lady Oakburn, whom she knew best, she eagerly questioned him. But Dr. James was upon his guard, told Lucy the pain had left her papa, and she might go in for a minute to see him.

The child delighted, went in. The earl stroked her head and kissed her; told her to take a kiss to mamma and to the "young blue-jacket," and to say that his voyage was going on to a prosperous ending. Then, remindful of what the medical men had said about its being kept from his wife, or it might cost her her life, and afraid of a slip-word on his own part, he dismissed the child, telling her he was to remain very quiet all day. Lucy flew to the countess's chamber, encountering the angry nurse at the door, who looked ready for a pitched battle.

"It's quite impossible that you can enter, my lady."

Lucy pleaded. And the nurse found that the child had only come to bring *glad* news, and to talk of the little "blue-jacket;" so she allowed her to go in.

And when Dr. James came to pay his morning visit to the countess, his answers to her inquiries were

full of reassuring suavity, calculated to give ease to her mind. No idea did they impart that the earl was dying; indeed, Lady Oakburn rather gathered from them that he might be taking a renewed lease of life.

CHAPTER IV.

Going Out with the Tide.

LADY JANE CHESNEY was seated at breakfast in her house at South Wennock, when a man on horse-back, wearing the uniform of the telegraph office at Great Wennock, came galloping to the gate. Jane saw him hand in a despatch, and her heart fluttered strangely. Imagination took a wide range and settled upon Clarice. When Judith entered she saw that her mistress's very lips were white.

"I am afraid to open it, Judith," spoke poor Jane, as the girl held it out to her. "It may bring bad news."

"Nay, my lady, I should hope the contrary," was Judith's answer. "It's known there was a young heir expected: perhaps this is to tell that he is born."

The colour came into Jane's face again. Of course it was nothing else! How could she have been so oblivious? No, no chance of its being from the unhappy Clarice: *she* seemed lost for good. With fingers that burned — burned at the thought of who the young heir's mother was, and who she had been, — Jane Chesney tore open the despatch,

"London. Half-past eight, A.M."

"RICHARD JAMES, M.D., TO THE LADY JANE
CHESNEY.

"The Earl of Oakburn is dangerously ill: come at

once, if you would see him alive. He says bring Lady Laura."

The despatch fell from her hand, and she burst into tears. All her old affection for her father had come back again in that one moment.

What was to be thought of first? Lady Jane took a minute for reflection, and then her plans were formed. She wrote a line in pencil to Laura, explaining what the matter was, and telling her she would call for her in a fly. The servant was to leave the note at Mr. Carlton's, and then go on to the Red Lion, get the fly, and come back in it. Meanwhile, Lady Jane and Judith prepared themselves, and were ready when the fly came. Jane got in, and they drove to her sister's. Mr. Carlton came forth. Jane bowed coldly, but vouchsafed to him no other greeting.

"Is Lady Laura not ready?" she asked.

"Laura is absent," he replied. "The twisted note you sent was not sealed, and I opened it. She is gone to spend a few days at Pembury with Colonel and Mrs. Marden."

Jane was rather at a nonplus for a moment. "This opportunity for a reconciliation with the earl should not be lost," she resumed at length. "Lady Laura must be telegraphed to." *Lady Laura!* Not to him, though he was the husband, would she speak the simple name. "I will telegraph to her myself as I pass the Great Wennock Station," continued Jane, as she gave the signal to drive on. "Good morning."

"Thank you," returned Mr. Carlton, "if you will take the trouble. Good morning, Lady Jane. I sincerely hope you will find the earl better on your arrival."

A hasty journey to the station; a hasty telegraphic message, dispatched to Lady Laura Carlton at Colonel Marden's; and Lady Jane and Judith were seated in an express train, whirling away towards London.

They reached Portland Place early in the afternoon. A change for the worse had taken place in the earl; he was rapidly sinking. Lady Jane was shown immediately to his chamber. She remembered the large handsome bed-room which had been his, and was turning to it of her own accord.

"Not there, my lady," whispered the servant; "higher up."

"*Higher up?*" repeated Jane, with displeased emphasis.

"The countess is lying in that room. My lord is up-stairs."

Jane resented the news in her heart. *He* to be put out of his room for a Miss Lethwait! The words seemed to imply that she was ill, but Jane would not inquire. In the corridor, Lucy (who in spite of Miss Snow's watchfulness had not been quite cured of her propensity for looking over balustrades) flew down to her, in delight and surprise.

"Oh, Jane!" she uttered, clinging round her neck, "is it really you? How came you to come?"

Miss Snow would have found fault with the wording of the sentence. Jane only clasped her sister.

"I have come to see papa, Lucy. Is there no hope?"

"No hope!" echoed the child, staring at her sister.

"Why, Jane, whatever made you think that? He is as much better as he can be. He is nearly well. The pain is almost gone: and you know he always got well as soon as the pain left him."

Jane was staggered. The message had been ominous; the servant, now showing her up, had just told her there was no hope; what, then, did Lucy mean! But Dr. James was standing beside them, having emerged from the earl's room. He heard Lucy's words and saw Jane's perplexed countenance. He hastened to interfere, willing to prevent any inexpedient explanation.

"Lady Jane Chesney, I presume. But — allow me a moment, Lady Lucy: this is against orders. You were not to come to this corridor at all to-day: the earl must not be disturbed."

"Oh, Dr. James! I was obliged just to come when I saw my sister. But I'll go back to Miss Snow now. Jane, you will come into the study when you have seen papa?"

Jane promised.

"Oh, and Jane there's a new baby. Do you know it? He is such a darling little fellow, and papa calls him 'young blue-jacket.' He is three days old."

"Is there?" responded Jane, and Lucy went back again. Jane turned inquiringly to the physician.

"The earl, I grieve to say, is sinking," he whispered. "We keep the fact from the child that it may not get to the ears of the countess; she would go immediately and tell her."

"Is it right to keep it from the countess?" asked Jane, her tone, as she put the question, betraying that she thought it was wrong.

Dr. James heaved up his physicianly hands and eyes.

"Right to keep it from her, Lady Jane! I would not for the world allow it to reach her ladyship in her present state of health; we don't know what the con-

sequences might be. My reputation is at stake, my lady."

Jane bowed her head, and entered her father's room. The earl lay with his eyes closed, breathing heavily. Death was on his face: Jane saw that at the first glance. The slight movement she made caused him to open them: a joyful ray of gladness flashed into his countenance, and he feebly put out his hand. Jane sank on her knees, and burst into a wailing flood of tears as she clasped it.

"Oh, father, father!"

Who can tell how bitter was that moment to Jane Chesney? In spite of the marriage and the new wife, in spite of the estrangement and the separation, she had unconsciously nourished a secret hope, unacknowledged to herself openly, but not the less dear to her heart, that she and her father should come together again; that she should still be his dear daughter, living in the sunshine of his presence, ministering to his comfort as of old. How it was to be brought about, she never glanced at; but the hope, the prospect, had not been less cherished. And now — there he lay, but a few hours of life left to him! Had Jane's heart not broken before, it would have broken then.

The day drags through, though storms keep out the sun.

And thus the heart will break, but brokenly live on.

Her head was bowed over him, and she allowed a few moments for the indulgence of her anguish. Her bonnet was off, and Lord Oakburn stretched over his other hand, and laid it fondly on her hair.

"Don't fret, Jane. We must all make the port at last."

"Oh, father, father!" she repeated, in agony, "is there no hope?"

"Not in this ship, Jane. But I'm going into a better one. One not made with human hands, child; one where the pumps don't get choked or the timbers rotten. My voyage is nearly over, Jane."

She sobbed piteously; she scarcely knew how to bear the hour's trial.

"Father, are we to part *thus*, having been estranged all this while? Oh, father, forgive me for my rebellion; forgive me for all the grief I may have caused you; but I could not endure to feel nothing to you, to be a cipher in your home."

"Child, what do you mean? You have not been rebellious to me; you must go to Laura for that. It did hurt you, Jane, I know, and I was vexed when I had done it; but you see, child, I wanted to have a direct heir, and now he is born. Forgive *me*, Jane, for the pain I caused you, but don't you ask forgiveness of me; you, my dutiful child, who have ever been ready to put your hands under my feet. I might have set about it in a more shipshape manner, have taken you into my counsels, and made it pleasant for all sides; and I wish I had. You see, I thought you wouldn't like it, and I was a coward and did not speak. She has been a good wife to me, Jane; and she respects you, and would love you, if you'd let her."

Jane did not answer. An attendant opened the door to see if anything might be wanted, but was waved away again.

"So Laura would not come, Jane?"

"She could not come," sobbed Jane; "she was at Pembury. She is telegraphed for, and may be here by the next train."

"Does he make her a good husband?"

"I think so; I hear nothing to the contrary. I do not go there," added Jane, trying to subdue her aching heart, so as to speak calmly.

"And now, Jane, where's Clarice? In this, my death-hour, she is more anxiously present to me than any of you. Has harm come to her?"

"Father, I don't know where she is: I cannot think or imagine where. I begin to fear that harm has come to her; sometimes I feel sure of it."

"In what shape?" asked the earl.

"Nay, how can I tell? Then again, I reason that she must be abroad: but the thought of her has become to me a wearing care."

"However it may be, I can do nothing," panted the peer, "but, Jane, I leave her to you. Mind! *I leave her to you!* Spare no exertions to discover her; make it your object in life, until it is accomplished; keep that port always in view in your steering. And when you have found her give her my blessing, and tell her I have not been able to leave her well off, but that I have done what I could. You will give her a home, Jane, if she will not come to her step-mother?"

"As long as I have one, father."

"Yours is secured, such as it is. Lucy—"

The earl's voice had been growing weaker, and now ceased altogether. Jane opened the door, and beckoned in the attendants, whom she found waiting outside.

"Oh, missee! oh, missee!" wept poor Pompey, pressing forward, "massa never get up no more!"

The earl appeared to have sunk into a sort of stupor; they could scarcely tell whether it was stupor

or sleep. When the medical men paid their next visit, they said he might go off in it, or might rally from it for a time. Jane sat in the room; she could not leave him. And thus the day passed on.

Passed on without bringing Laura. Jane wondered much. *Would* she not come — as the earl had fancied? She listened intently, her ear being alive to every sound.

The medical men came in and out, but the dying man still lay as he was, and gave no token. Once more Jane urged upon them the claims of the countess — that she ought to be apprised of the danger; but they positively refused to listen. It grew dark, and the nurse brought in the night-lamp. Jane was watching her arrange it, watching her mechanically, when a voice was heard from the bed.

“Jane.”

It was her father's; he had roused up to consciousness; it almost seemed to strength, for the voice was firm, and the sight and sense seemed clear. Jane put a few teaspoonfuls of jelly within his lips.

“Jane, I think I have seen the country on the other side. It's better than Canaan was, and the rivers are like crystal, and the flowers on the banks are bright. I am nearly there, Jane; just one narrow strait to work through first, which looks dark; but the darkness is nothing, for I can see the light beyond it.”

Jane's tears fell on the bed-clothes. She could not trust her voice to answer: and the earl was silent for a time.

“Such a great big ship, Jane,” he began again; “big enough to hold all the people in the world; and those who get into her are at rest for ever. No more

cold watches to keep in the dark night; no more shifting sails; no more tacking and wearing; no more struggles with the storm and hurricane; the Great Commander does it all for us. You'll come to me there, Jane? I am but going on a short while first."

"Yes," Jane softly whispered through her sobs, "to be together in bliss for ever and ever."

"Where's Clarice?" he suddenly exclaimed. "Is she not come?"

Jane had little doubt that he meant Laura. "We did not expect Clarice," she said. "And Laura is not here yet."

"Jane, perhaps Clarice has gone into the beautiful ship before me. I may find her there."

"I don't know," Jane faintly answered, feeling how worse than unsatisfactory was the uncertainty respecting Clarice in that dying hour. "Father, if — if Laura cannot be here in time, you will leave her your forgiveness?"

"It is left to her. You may give it to her again; my love and my full forgiveness. But she might have come for it. Perhaps he would not let her, Jane."

"You forget," she murmured; "Laura was not at home, and Mr. Carlton could not prevent her. Why should he wish to do so? I do not think he would."

"Tell Laura I forgive him, too; and I hope he may get into the ship with the rest of us. But Jane, I cannot like him; I never did. When Laura finds herself upon the quicksands, do you shelter her; she'll have nobody else to do it."

Was that sentence spoken with the strange prevision that sometimes attends the dying? Perhaps so!

A slight sound upon the muffled knocker. Jane's

quick ear caught it. She hoped it was Laura, but it was only Dr. James. He came into the earl's room, and then went down to pay a visit to the countess.

After his departure Lord Oakburn again sank into what seemed a stupor, and lay so for an hour or two. As ten o'clock struck he started from it.

"Eliza, what's the time?"

Jane glanced at his watch, which was hanging up, for she had not noticed the striking of the house clock.

"Five minutes past ten."

"Oh, it's you, Jane," he said, with a sort of gladness that it *was* her, which found its echo in Jane's heart; and he feebly put out his hand in search of hers. "My own Jane! with me at last! She doesn't know how I have missed her."

The last sentence appeared to be spoken as if he were oblivious of her presence, in that treachery of memory which frequently accompanies the dying: and there was a second glad echo within her heart.

"I am not in there yet, Jane, and the passage seems long. But there the ship is — what a sight! with her spars and her white sails. They are silvered over; and the spars are as glass, and the ship herself is gold. But it seems long to wait! How's the tide?"

His voice had grown so indistinct that Jane had to bend down to listen, but the last question was spoken in a clear and anxious tone. She gave some soothing answer, not supposing that he meant the tide of reality — the matter-of-fact "high water at London Bridge" of the living, moving world.

"The tide, Jane, the tide?" he continued, pointing with his finger to his own nautical almanac, which

lay on his dressing table. Jane rose and reached the book.

"The tide is coming in, father," she said, after finding the place. "It will be high water at eleven o'clock."

"Ay, ay. That's what I am waiting for. I couldn't go against the tide, Jane; it must turn. I am going out with the tide."

Jane put the book back, and resumed her post by him.

"Give my love to my wife, Jane, and tell her I wish I could have seen her; but the doctors wouldn't let it be so. And, Jane, you'll love my little son?"

"Oh, yes," she answered, with a sobbing sigh.

"And you'll come here sometimes when I'm gone? You'll come to see Lucy."

"Oh, father!" uttered Jane, in a tone of startled pain, "you surely have not left her away from me?"

The earl half opened his eyes. "What?"

"You have not left the guardianship of Lucy to any one but *me*?" breathlessly continued Jane. "Father, I have brought her up from her cradle; I have been to her a second mother; you could not leave her away from me?"

He was evidently troubled, insensible as he had nearly become to earthly things.

"I did not think of it, Jane; when I made my will, I did not think —" his voice sunk and Jane could not catch it. Silence fell upon the room, broken only by a convulsive sort of sound that arose now and then: the sobs of Jane.

"It's getting dark," he resumed, later; "come closer to me, Jane. Don't you see the ship? She's

lying at anchor while she waits. Look at her, Jane; how bright she is; never mind it's being dark here. The banks are green, and the flowers brilliant, and the clouds are of rose colour. And there, there's the Captain! there he is! Oh, Jane, shut your eyes, you cannot look upon his brightness. He is beckoning to me; he is beckoning to me!" reiterated the earl, his earnest voice so full of strange, loving triumph, that to Jane's mind it was impossible to connect what he said with a mere worldly vision. "I told you he would not reject a poor weather-beaten sailor. He is going to guide the ship to God — right into the blessed port of Heaven. Yes, yes, I am coming; never mind the darkness; we shall soon be in the light."

He said no more, but lay quietly. The tide turned at eleven o'clock to go out, and the spirit of Francis, thirteenth Earl of Oakburn, went out with it.

One of the servants left the room to make known the event to the household below, and in the same moment Lady Laura Carlton, so anxiously looked for, arrived. It turned out that when the telegraphic despatch reached Colonel Marden's, she and the family had just departed on a day's excursion to some distant ruins. It was given to her when she returned home, but that was not until five in the evening; she had lost no time in coming then.

Laura was of an impetuous nature, and the instant the door was opened to her she ran up the stairs, trusting to instinct to find her father's bedroom. In the corridor of the first floor, close to the countess's chamber, she encountered the servant who had just left the room above. "How is the earl?" she then inquired.

The servant stared at her. Perhaps the woman did not know that another daughter was expected. She made no answer for the moment, and Laura stamped her foot impatiently.

"I ask you how Lord Oakburn is! Don't you know me? I am Lady Laura Carlton."

"The earl is dead, my lady," replied the woman in a low voice. "The breath has just left his body."

"Dead!" shrieked Laura, in a tone that might be heard in every part of the house. "My father dead! Oh, Jane, is it true?" she wailed out, catching sight of Jane Chesney on the stairs above. "Jane, Jane! is papa dead?"

Out came the nurse from Lady Oakburn's room, her face as white as a sheet and as sour as a crab, praying for caution and silence. Laura went higher up, and Jane took her into the death-chamber.

She flung herself down by the side of the bed, crying frantically, almost raving. Why had she not been sent for earlier? why had they allowed him to die without her seeing him? Jane, in her quiet, but far deeper grief, strove to soothe her; she whispered of his peaceful frame of mind, of his loving message of forgiveness; but Laura sobbed on hysterically, and would not be comforted.

A sight startled them both. A tall figure, robed in a flannel dressing-gown, with an ashy pale face, came gliding in and stood gazing at the corpse. Laura had never seen her before, and the sight hushed her to silence; Jane knew her for Lady Oakburn. The nurse followed behind, wringing her hands, and audibly lamenting what it appeared she had no power to prevent. Laura's cry in the corridor had penetrated to

the chamber, and Lady Oakburn rose out of her bed to come.

Anguish and reproach struggled in her countenance; anguish at her husband's death, reproach at those who had kept his state from her; but she had powerful command over her feelings, and retained almost unnatural calmness. Seeing Jane, she turned and confronted her.

"Was this well done, Lady Jane?"

"I do not know precisely to what you allude," was Jane's answer. "I am a stranger in the house, holding no authority in it, and whether things are ill or well done, it is not I who am responsible. I would have saved my father's life with my own, had it been possible so to save it."

"You have been here with him?"

"Since this afternoon."

"And yet you have excluded me!" returned Lady Oakburn, her voice trembling with suppressed emotion. "You think it right to exclude a wife from her husband's death-bed?"

"I think it very wrong," said Lady Jane: "I think nothing can justify it, save peril to her own life. The first caution I had breathed into my ear upon entering this house was, that the truth of my father's state, his danger, must be kept from you. I ventured to remonstrate; yes, I did: once to Dr. James alone, again to the medical men in concert; and I was told that it was essential you should be kept in ignorance; that the tidings, if imparted, might have the worst effect upon you. I should have been the first to tell you, had I dared."

Lady Oakburn turned her condemning eyes on the

nurse. "It was Dr. James," spoke up the woman; "he gave his orders throughout the household, and we could but obey him. He was afraid of such a thing as this, that has now happened: and who's to know, my lady, that you may not die for it?"

"I beg your pardon," murmured the countess to Jane. "Oh, Lady Jane, let us be friends in this awful moment!" she implored, an irresistible impulse prompting her to speak. "He was your father; my husband; and he is lying dead before us; he has entered into the world where strife must cease; forgive me for the injury you think I did you, for the estrangement that I unhappily caused; let us at least be friends in the present hour, though the future should bring coolness again!"

Jane Chesney put her hand into her step-mother's. "It was not my fault that you were not with him; had it rested with me, you should have been. He charged me to give you his love, and to say how he wished he could have seen you, but that the doctors forbade it. His death has been very peaceful; full of hope of a better world; a little while, he said, and we should all be joining him there."

Lady Oakburn, Jane's hand still in hers, had laid her face upon the pillow by the dead, when a storm of suffocating sobs was heard behind them. Lucy, likewise aroused by Laura's cry on the stairs, had stolen in, in her night dress.

"You kept it from me too, Lucy!" exclaimed Lady Oakburn, in a tone of sad reproach. "And I *trusted* to you!"

"It was kept from her," spoke up the nurse. "We

were afraid of the child's knowing it, my lady, because she would have carried the news to you."

"Oh, Jane," sobbed the little girl, "why has your love gone from us? You knew he was dying, and you never told me! you need not have begrudged a kiss to me from him for the last time."

"I have no longer authority in the house, Lucy," repeated Jane, "and can but do as I am told. I am but a stranger in it."

Her tone, broken by suffering, by sorrow, by a sound of *injury*, struck upon them all, even amidst their own grief.

Laura had been kneeling in the shade since Lady Oakburn's entrance; had neither spoken to her, nor been seen by Lucy. Jane turned to her now.

"And he left you his forgiveness, Laura; his full and free forgiveness, and his blessing," she said, as her silent tears dropped. "He died leaving his forgiveness to Mr. Carlton; his good wishes for him. Oh, but that I know my father has gone to peace, to heavenly happiness, this trial would be greater than I could bear!"

The last words appeared to escape her in her excess of anguish. It was indeed a night of bitter trial for them all; but for none perhaps as it was for Jane.

Still, in spite of her grief, she was obliged to forego a great part of her prejudice against Lady Oakburn. It was certainly not a time to retain ill-feeling; and Jane could not close her eyes to facts — that Lady Oakburn had been a good woman in her new home. If Jane could but forgive the marriage, the countess's conduct in all her new duties had been admirable: and as she sobbed that night by Jane's

side, and reiterated over and over again her grief, her *remorse* for the estrangement between the earl and his daughter, her humble prayer that Lady Jane would at least *try* to learn to look upon her as not an enemy, Jane's heart insensibly warmed, and she unconsciously began to like the countess better than ever she had liked her as Miss Lethwait.

"If I have been wrong in my prejudice, more obstinate than I ought to be, if it brought pain to my dear father, may God forgive me!" she murmured. "Yes, Lady Oakburn, we will be friends henceforth; good friends, I trust; never more enemies."

And Lady Oakburn took Jane's hand and sobbed over it. The trouble she had brought upon Lady Jane, the estrangement caused by her between Jane and her father, had been the one thorn in the countess's wedded life.

CHAPTER V.

The Next Day.

On the morning following the death, Judith went abroad to make certain purchases for her mistress, and in passing along Piccadilly she encountered Stephen Grey — now Dr. Grey, as you have heard. The two stopped, mutually surprised and delighted: it is so pleasant to meet an old face from one's native place, no matter what the social degree.

"Why, Judith," he exclaimed, "is it you or your ghost? What wind blew you to town?"

He put out his hand to shake hands with her: he was the same Stephen Grey as ever, free and cordial. Judith's face glowed with pleasure: if there was one

person in all South Wennock who believed in Mr. Stephen Grey's innocence, and that he was an ill-used man, it was Judith Ford.

"Lady Jane was telegraphed for yesterday, sir," she explained. "The earl was dying. We got to London in the afternoon, and he died a few minutes past eleven at night."

"I heard of his death this morning. Gout, I suppose?"

"Gout in the stomach, I believe, sir," replied Judith. "But he suffered as good as nothing yesterday, sir, and died peacefully as a child."

"He would not suffer much towards the last," remarked the doctor. "And the young earl is a strapping shaver of four days old! Death and birth, Judith; the one comes to replace the other."

"It's in the course of nature that it should be so, sir," was the answering remark of Judith. "But as to the baby being strapping, I don't know about that, for I have not seen him. It's born healthy and straight, the servants say, and that's the chief thing. Lady Laura is up in Portland Place also," she added, "but she did not get there in time to see her father alive."

"How was that — if Lady Jane could do it?"

"Lady Laura was out, visiting at Pembury. My lady sent a note to her, thinking she was at home, and we called for her in the fly as we were going to the station. Mr. Carlton came out to Lady Jane; I don't fancy she much liked meeting him; she has never once met him face to face, sir, until yesterday, since the marriage."

"How is Carlton getting on?" asked the doctor. "Well, I hear."

"Very well, I believe," answered Judith. "But Mr. Grey and his partner, Mr. Lycett, have as much as ever they can do. There's plenty of practice for all, sir."

"I always said there was," replied the doctor. "Do Carlton and Frederick fall out still?" And he laughed as he asked the question.

"Not that I hear of, sir. I fancy they keep apart, for there's no love lost between them. He gets so good-looking, does Master Frederick: the last time I saw him he said he should soon be leaving for London."

"Very soon now. But we thought it better he should remain for a time at South Wennock, where he gets more of the drudgery of the profession than he would with me."

"And, sir, if I may make bold to ask it, how are you prospering?"

"Famously, Judith. Short as the time is that I have been here, I am making a great deal more than I did at South Wennock. So if your friend, Carlton, thought to ruin me by driving me away, he has not succeeded in his wish."

The doctor spoke in a light, pleasant tone. He cherished enmity to none, not even to Mr. Carlton; to do so was not in his nature. But Judith resented the words.

"Mr. Carlton is no friend of mine, sir; I don't like him well enough. When shall you be paying a visit to South Wennock, Mr. Stephen?"

"My goodness, Judith! The idea of your calling me 'Mr. Stephen!'" returned the jesting doctor. "I'm a great man now, and shall enter an action against

you for defamation of title. Don't you know I am the famed Dr. Grey?"

Judith smiled. His merriment was contagious. "But when shall you be coming, sir?"

"Perhaps never," he replied, a shade of seriousness arising to his face. "South Wennock did not treat me so well that I should wish to see it speedily. Should the mystery ever be cleared up about that poisoned draught — and, mark you, Judith, when it is cleared up, it will be found that I was innocent — then I may visit it again."

Judith fell into momentary thought, wondering whether the mystery ever would be cleared up. She hoped it would be sometime; and yet — she dreaded that that time should come.

"You will look in upon us, won't you, Judith, now you are in town? Mrs. Stephen Grey will be glad to see an old face."

"Thank you, sir," replied Judith, much gratified at the invitation. "I shall be glad to pay my duty to Mrs. Grey. Does London agree with her, sir?"

"I'm afraid it does not, Judith, very well. But neither did South Wennock. She is always delicate you know, let her be where she will. Ah, Judith, if we could but find some Utopia of a spot in this lower world, warranted to give health to all invalids, what a thing it would be! As great a boon as the mill we are always looking for that grinds folks young again."

He was turning away laughing. Judith stopped him.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but I do not know your address."

“Bless me, don’t you! I thought all the world knew where the great Dr. Grey lived,” he returned in his jesting way. “There it is” — giving her his card — “Savile Row; and mind you find your way to it.”

Curious to say, that accidental interview, that simple giving of the card to Judith, led to an event quite unlooked for.

When Judith reached home — that is, her temporary home for the time being, Portland Place — she found the house in a sort of commotion, although it was the house of the dead. Lady Oakburn had dismissed her medical attendant, Dr. James.

She had done it, as she did most things, in a quiet lady-like manner, but one entirely firm and uncompromising. Dr. James had by stratagem, *by untruth*, prevented a last interview between her and her husband, and she felt that she could not regard him again with feelings unallied to vexation and anger: it was better therefore that they should part. Dr. James urged that what he had done, he had done for the best, out of concern for her ladyship’s welfare. That, her ladyship did not doubt, she answered; but she could not forget or forgive the way in which it had been accomplished: in her judgment, Dr. James should have imparted to her the truth of her husband’s state, and *then* urged prudence upon her. It was the deceit she could not forgive, or — in short — countenance.

The result was the dismissal of Dr. James, and the dismay of the nurse in attendance upon the countess. The dismay extended itself to Lady Jane. Although the imprudence of Lady Oakburn on the pre-

vious night appeared not to have materially affected her, still she was not yet in a sufficiently convalescent state to be left without a medical attendant. Lady Oakburn appeared to think she was: she was not personally acquainted with any other doctor in London, she said to Jane, and seemed to dislike the idea of a stranger's being called to her of whose manners and skill she could know nothing. It was in this dilemma that Judith found the house on her return.

"Oh, my lady," she exclaimed to her mistress on the spur of the moment, "if the countess would but call in Mr. Stephen Grey! He is so sure! he is so skilful! and she could not fail to like him."

She extended the card as she spoke, and told of the recent interview. Jane listened, and carried the card to the countess.

"Let me send for him, Lady Oakburn," she urged. "I do think it is necessary that you should have some one; and, as Judith says, you could not fail to like Dr. Grey."

Lady Oakburn consented. Known well to Judith, partially to Lady Jane, he would not seem like a stranger: and Stephen Grey was sent for. It was the first step in the friendship that ensued between the Greys and Lady Oakburn: a friendship that was destined to bring great events in its train.

It was a somewhat singular coincidence that the Dowager Countess of Oakburn should die the day subsequent to the earl. Such was the fact. She had been ill for several weeks; no immediate danger was apprehended, but in the very hour that she heard news of the earl's death — the tidings of which were conveyed to her in the morning — she was taken sud-

denly worse, and expired at three o'clock in the afternoon. Lady Jane went to her house at Kensington and was in time to see her alive, but she had then lost consciousness, and was speechless. One of the old countess's granddaughters said — it was a dreadfully irreverent thing to say — that they must have gone together to plague each other on the journey, just as they had plagued each other in life.

It was decided that the two funerals should take place at the same time and spot in one of the great London cemeteries. The burial place of the Earls of Oakburn was Chesney Oaks; but he, the old sailor just gone, had expressly desired that no parade and no expense, beyond what was absolutely necessary, should be wasted upon him. The conveying him to Chesney Oaks would involve a considerable outlay; his poor worthless body would not rest any the better for it, he quaintly said; let it be put into the ground in the simplest manner possible, and in the nearest burial-place. The executors of the countess dowager thought it well to observe the same private simplicity with regard to her, and it was arranged that they should be interred together.

Jane and Laura remained in town until the funeral should be over. They would not quit the house while their father lay dead in it; and in the new reconciliation with his widow, there was no necessity for their hurrying away. Laura, impetuous in all her doings, took a violent fancy to the countess, protesting secretly to Jane that she was a far superior woman to what she had imagined; and it would be a convenient house to stay at, she candidly added, when she chose to visit London. Jane was not swayed by any motives so

interested; but she could not help acknowledging to herself that the countess won upon her regard day by day.

"She has done her duty by Lucy," Miss Snow remarked to Lady Jane confidentially. "Ah, never a mother was more anxious for a child's welfare than Lady Oakburn is for Lucy's. I made my mind up at first not to stop; but when I found how good she was, how she tried to do her utmost for us all in loving-kindness, I thought I should be foolish to leave. She would not have kept me, though, but for the earl; she told me she should wish to take the child's education entirely into her own hands, but he would not suffer it. I daresay she will take it now."

They were busy getting their mourning. Jane ordered hers neat and good, entirely befitting a lady, but plain; Laura chose hers for its magnificence. Jane ventured to give her a caution against the expense, and Laura tossed her head in answer.

"Papa is sure to have remembered me," she said, "and surely I may spend what is my own." And she actually appealed to the countess — was it not certain that the earl had left her her share of money?

It was a curious question to put, and perhaps the very fact of asking it proved that Laura was not quite so sure upon the point as she wished to be. Lady Oakburn, however, could tell her nothing. She did not know how the earl had left his affairs. That he had made a recent will, she believed; for in the prospect of a little child's being born, he had remarked to her that he must settle his affairs in accordance with the prospect, and she thought he had done so; but she did not know any details, for the earl had not mentioned them to her.

Oh, it was sure to be all right, Laura remarked with customary unconcern; and she bought every pretty black dress that attracted her eye.

"You will be godmother to the little baby, Lady Jane, when the time comes for christening him?" supplicated the countess with sensible hesitation. "He shall belong as much to you as to me."

"Yes, willingly," replied Jane. *She* did not hesitate; that little frail being in its sheltering cradle seemed to be the one link to life left by her father.

"And — if I may express a wish — will you not call him Francis?"

"Francis, certainly; Francis always. The Earls of Oakburn have mostly been John — but I don't know that it need be a rule for us. We can name him Francis John; but he must be called Francis."

On one of the days that intervened between the death and the burial, Jane borrowed the countess's carriage — her own but one short year before — and went to Gloucester terrace. Though feeling a conviction that Mrs. West would have sent to her had she heard news of Clarice, it did not seem right to Jane's anxious mind that she should leave London again without personally inquiring. But when she reached the house she received a disappointment; Mrs. West and her children, she was told, were at the sea-side.

As Jane stood in the door-way in hesitation — as is the manner of many when they meet with an unexpected check — a gentleman put his head out at one of the sitting-rooms, wondering perhaps who might be the visitor, and what the colloquy was about. He was a pleasant-looking man, short and stout, with a red face and bristling hair.

"It's a good six weeks before my mistress will be at home, ma'am," the servant was saying. "She only went ten days ago, and — but here's master," she broke off, as the gentleman came forward. "Perhaps he can tell more certain nor me."

Mr. West advanced to Lady Jane. His wife, Mrs. West, was out of town, he observed. Could he answer any questions for her, or convey to her any message? — he should be joining her at Ramsgate on the morrow.

Jane stepped into the sitting-room. He would probably know as much as his wife, was the reflection that crossed her mind. She mentioned the errand that she had come upon, and that she had been there some fifteen months previously on the same.

"Oh yes, yes," said Mr. West. "I remember my wife spoke of the circumstance to me — Lady Jane Chesney, I presume," he added with a bow. "I am sorry to say that we have never heard anything of Miss Beauchamp. Only a short while before my wife left home for Ramsgate, she was talking of Miss Beauchamp and wondering whether her friends had found her."

Jane sighed heavily, although she had expected nothing else but the disappointment. "No," she said, in a low tone, "we have not found her; we have not heard of her."

"It is very extraordinary," exclaimed Mr. West.

"It is more than that," said Jane, "it is alarming. Until lately we cherished the hope that she had gone abroad with some family, but every month that glides on seems to set the hope more and more at nought. Thank you," she added, moving to the door, and hand-

ing him a card. "That is my address in the country, where I reside. Should Mrs. West ever hear of her — though indeed the suggestion sounds a forlorn one — perhaps she will kindly forward me word of it there."

"I am sure you may rely upon her doing so," returned Mr. West. "And I only wish I had been able to give your ladyship better news now," he heartily concluded.

Attending her outside, he stood on the pavement while she stepped into the carriage, and was driven away. Jane sat in it strangely disheartened, considering that she had expected no better. A conviction had latterly been gaining upon her that Clarice was dead, and she seemed only to be able to think of her as such.

But now there was one little item of news regarding Miss Beauchamp that Mrs. West had learnt since she last saw Lady Jane, and which she would certainly have imparted to her had she been at home, though she had not deemed it of sufficient importance to write to her; and perhaps had also abstained from doing it lest she might make mischief. Mr. West knew it, but he never supposed that it was not known to Lady Jane. After all, it was not much; and would have left the affair in at least equal mystery to that which at present enshrouded it.

CHAPTER VI.

An Impromptu Visit.

LADY OAKBURN sat in her chamber, in an easy chair by the fire. She sat up for several hours a day now, although the nurse with her old-fashioned ideas protested it was "too soon." Only Laura was with her, and she, Laura, held the little baby on her lap. Quite a mark of condescension for Laura, who was not fond of bringing herself into contact with things so troublesome as babies.

"I wish my own had lived," she was saying to Lady Oakburn. "It was the sweetest little girl ever seen. But I should not have nursed it, you know; I could not have subjected myself to the tie. I cannot think how you can have undertaken such a task! — you'll never be able to go out."

Lady Oakburn smiled. She and Laura were very different. "How long did your child live?" she inquired.

"Only a day and a half. Mr. Carlton saw from the first that it would not live; but he did not tell me, and I wondered why he had it baptised so quickly. When he asked me what the name should be, and said Mr. Lycett was down-stairs and would baptise it, I inquired why he wanted it done, and he said carelessly it was as well, when infants were delicate. I thought nothing of the answer then, but he has told me since!"

"What did you name it?"

"Laura. Mr. Carlton wished it, and I like the name very well. What is Jane sitting in that strange manner for? Like a statue!"

For Jane Chesney had now returned from the visit to Mrs. West, had made her way wearily up the stairs to the countess's bed-room, and sunk down on a chair near the door. Disappointment was pressing heavily on her heart. As Laura turned to her in her wonder, Jane rose and came forward.

"I have had so fruitless a journey," she said. "Mrs. West, the lady I went to call on, was at Ramsgate, but I saw her husband. They have heard nothing whatever of Clarice. I am sure she will never be found now."

"I should turn the world topsy-turvy but what I'd find her," cried impetuous Laura. "She *can't* be lost, you know! Such a thing could not happen in these days."

Jane shook her head in silence. All the likely places she and her father could think of had been turned "topsy-turvy" in one sense, in the past days: but they had not found Clarice.

"I am sure it was quite a weight upon papa's mind at the last," murmured Jane. "Did he talk much of her?" she continued, lifting her eyes to Lady Oakburn.

The countess replied almost eagerly. That some mystery was attaching to one of the earl's daughters she knew; for in the time of her residence in the house as governess, chance words relating to the Lady Clarice had been dropped in her hearing. But she had heard nothing further. After her marriage she inquired about her of the earl, but he had passed the question over lightly, as if not caring to speak of the subject. This she now told Jane.

"But — do you mean to say, Lady Oakburn, that

papa did not acquaint you with the particulars?" asked Jane, in some surprise.

"He never did. I am sure he did not like to speak of the subject."

"I wonder that he did not," said Jane.

"I don't wonder at it at all," dissented Laura. *I* don't like to speak of it. Would you believe, Lady Oakburn, that I have never once spoken of it to my husband? He has not the least idea that we ever had another sister."

"But why do you not speak of it to him?" returned Lady Oakburn.

"I don't know," mused Laura. "I cannot bear to speak of Clarice to any one. It does not sound nice to confess to a sister who went out as a governess in disobedience, and does not come home again. I say I can't explain the feeling, but there it is within me, very strong. I dare say papa felt the same; we were much alike, he and I. It will be time enough to tell my husband about Clarice when she is found."

"Did she go in disobedience?" asked Lady Oakburn.

"Yes," said Laura. "It was very wilful of her. I don't mind talking of it to you, Lady Oakburn, as you know something of it, and we are upon the subject. For a long, long while papa would not so much as allow her name to be mentioned in the house. By the way, Jane," she continued, "do you know a thought has struck me more than once — you remember that scrap of a letter that I brought to you when you first came back to South Wennock?"

"Do I remember it!" repeated Jane. "I am

looking at it often. It puzzles me more than I care to say."

"Well, what has struck me is, that perhaps — it is just possible — papa in his anger opened that letter although it was addressed to you, and tore it up as soon as opened."

"No," said Jane. "So unable was I to find any solution of the matter, that I, like you, fancied it possible papa had opened it, and I wrote to him from South Wennock and put the question."

"And he said he had not?"

"He wrote to me by return of post. He had never seen or heard of any such letter."

"Then I think I remember the circumstance — that is, your letter coming to him," interposed the countess, looking at Jane. "He was reading a letter from you one morning at breakfast, when he grew a little excited, a little angry, and called out he should like to know what Jane could mean. Lucy asked what it was, and he answered that Jane had been writing to know if he had opened one of Clarice's letters: as if he *would* have opened anything from her at that time, he added: he would not have touched one with the end of his stick. I recollect the words quite well," continued Lady Oakburn. "And I know I longed to inquire what the trouble was, regarding Lady Clarice, but I did not like to."

Jane sighed. "I feel — I begin to feel that we shall never find Clarice."

"Then that's nonsense," returned Laura. "She is sure to be found, dead or alive."

"Dead or alive," repeated Jane, in a low tone.

"Yes, perhaps she will. But it will not be alive."

Laura liked the sunny points of life better than the shady ones, and rarely took a dark view of anything. These unpleasant forebodings sounded as "nonsense" in her ears. Jane turned to Lady Oakburn and related to her the whole history of Clarice from beginning to end. It impressed Lady Oakburn very greatly; she thought she had never heard of anything so singular as this prolonged disappearance.

In telling the story, Jane made a passing allusion to the dream relating to Clarice, which had so disturbed her. Laura, who was putting the sleeping baby then into his little cot, interrupted her with a ridiculing word.

"Dreams, indeed! One would suppose you were some old nurse, Jane! How you can dwell upon that absurdity still, and repeat it, I cannot understand. Lady Oakburn is staring at you — and well she may!"

"At any rate we have never heard of Clarice since that dream," was Jane's answer; and her low, earnest voice told how much the subject affected her. "When Clarice shall be restored to us, safe and well, *then* I will forget my dream."

Laura threw up her supercilious head, and turned her back on Jane. "I must put my things on," she remarked to the countess; "your servants and horses will think I am not coming. I sent orders down that they should wait when they brought back Jane."

Jane had seen the look of surprise on Lady Oakburn's face, and spoke as Laura left the room. "I ought to tell you, Lady Oakburn, as a sort of answer to Laura's ridicule, that in the course of my past life three or four most singular dreams have visited me.

They have borne a strange coincidence — to say the least of it — with speedily following events. I am not by nature superstitious; I believe that I was born the reverse of it; but it is impossible but these dreams should have fixed themselves on my mind, as something neither to be accounted for nor understood."

"And you had one of these singular dreams relating to Lady Clarice?"

"I had. She was not Lady Clarice then. It was a very dreadful dream, and it appeared to shadow forth her death. Hour by hour, day by day, the dream, taken in conjunction with Clarice's prolonged disappearance, becomes more vivid to my memory. I cannot forget it."

"What was it?" asked Lady Oakburn.

"I would prefer not to tell it you," replied Jane. "Sometimes I think that if I related it to Laura she would ridicule it less."

"You have not related it to her?"

"No. To her, of all others, my tongue is tied."

"But why to her in particular, Lady Jane?"

"Well, the cause is — but it sounds foolish even in my own ears when spoken of, so what must it to a listener? The fact is — and a very curious fact it is, one which I cannot understand — that in this dream Mr. Carlton, Laura's present husband, was most unpleasantly prominent. The details I say I cannot give you, but I dreamt Clarice was dead — I dreamt that she appeared to me dead, and that she indicated Mr. Carlton as being the cause of her death, or in some manner aiding in it."

The countess's mind was entirely free from super-

stition, and in a silent, inwardly polite manner she had been wondering at Lady Jane. But the awe on the latter's countenance, the hushed voice, the *solemnity* in Jane's words, served to impart its own impression to her, and she felt inclined to have a fit of the shivers.

"He was not Laura's husband then, but I was in the habit of seeing him daily, for he was my father's medical attendant; and I argue with myself that that fact, the seeing him so frequently, caused him to be mixed up in the dream. I argue that it must have been a purely accidental coincidence; but in spite of this, in spite of myself, my reason, my judgment, I cannot get that sight of Mr. Carlton, as I saw him in the dream, from my mind; and ever since that moment I have felt a sort of horror of Mr. Carlton. I cannot expect you, Lady Oakburn, to excuse this, or to understand it; I feel myself that it is very wrong."

"But did Mr. Carlton know your sister Clarice?" demanded the countess, growing strangely interested.

Certainly not. And therefore my reason and good sense stand in condemnation against me, while the feeling, the horror, remains. I did once mention this to Laura — that Mr. Carlton was mixed up most unpleasantly in the dream, and that I could not help regarding him with a sort of shrinking dread; but I fancy she has forgotten it. It was before her marriage. At any rate, what with this, and what with Laura's general ridicule of such things, I never care to allude to the dream in her presence. I never should allude to it but as an explanation of the cause why I grew uneasy and wrote to Clarice those letters, which have never been answered."

"Won't you relate to me the dream?" asked the countess, in her interest. "I confess I am no believer in the theory some entertain, that dreams are sent as warnings; I fear I ridicule them as heartily as Lady Laura; but I should like to hear this one."

Jane shook her head. "I have never told it to any one. Pardon me, Lady Oakburn, if I still decline to repeat it to you. Independent of my own unconquerable repugnance, I do not think it would be fair to Mr. Carlton."

Lady Oakburn could not forbear a smile, and Jane saw it.

"Yes," she said in answer, "I know how foolish all this must seem to you. It is foolish; and I should be thankful if I could overget the prejudice it has given me against Mr. Carlton. That prejudice is the most foolish of all. I feel how unjustifiable it is, and yet —"

Another dreamer interrupted them: the infant peer in his cradle. He raised his voice with all the power of his little lungs, and Jane hastened to take him up and carry him to the countess.

Laura meanwhile, in Lady Oakburn's carriage, was being rattled over the stones of London. The carriage took its way to the East-end, to a populous but certainly not fashionable locality. She was about to pay an impromptu visit to her husband's father, Mr. Carlton.

In a crowded and remote thoroughfare, where riches and poverty, bustle and idleness, industry and guilt, seemed to mingle incongruously together, was situated the residence of Mr. Carlton. The carriage drew up before a square red brick house; not large, but suffi-

ciently commodious. It stood a little back from the street, and a paved court led to the entrance. On the door was a brass plate, "Mr. Carlton, Surgeon;" and over the door was a large lamp of flaring yellow and red glass.

Laura stepped out of the carriage, and a manservant opened the door almost the instant that she had rung at it.

"Can I see Mr. Carlton?"

"Not now, ma'am. It is not my master's hour for receiving patients. In a minute he will have left on his round of visits.

The servant by a slight gesture indicated a plain-looking brougham in waiting. Laura had not noticed it. The refusal did not please her, and she put on her most imperious manner.

"Your master is at home?"

"He is at home, ma'am, but I cannot admit you. It is the hour for his carriage, and — and there he is going to it," added the servant, a sort of relief in his tone, for he did not like controversy.

Laura turned quickly; a thin man of sixty had come out of a side door, and was crossing the paved court. She stepped up and confronted him.

"Mr. Carlton, I presume?"

She need not have asked. In the slender, spare, gentlemanlike form, in the well-shaped features, in the impassive expression of face, she saw her husband over again: her husband as he would be when thirty more years should have passed over his head — if they were destined to pass. In the elder man's sharp tone, his decisive gesture as he turned and answered to the call, she recognised the very manner of him so familiar to

her. The tone and manner were not discourteous certainly, but short and very uncompromising.

"I am Mr. Carlton. What is your business?"

"I have come to see you, sir. I have come all the way from the West-end to see you."

Mr. Carlton glanced at the carriage. He saw the earl's coronet on it; he saw the servants in their handsome livery — for the mourning was not assumed yet for the earl. But Mr. Carlton did not entertain any overdue reverence for earls on the whole, and carriages and servants he only regarded as necessary appendages to comfort to those who could afford them.

"Then I'm very sorry you should have come at this hour, young lady, that's all," he said. "I cannot see patients at home after the clock strikes three: and it struck two minutes ago; you might have heard it from yonder church. Were I to break the rule once, I might be wanted to break it always. If you will come to-morrow at —"

"I am not a patient," interrupted Laura.

"Not a patient? What are you, then?"

"I am your son's wife, sir: Lady Laura Carton."

Mr. Carlton betrayed no surprise. He looked at her for a minute or two, his impassive face never changing. Then he held out his arm with civility, and led her to the house. The entrance at the forbidden hour which he would have denied to a patient, however valuable, he accorded to his daughter-in-law.

He handed her into a room on the ground floor, a dining-room evidently; a dark sombre apartment, with heavy crimson velvet curtains, and handsome furniture as sombre as the room. The man-servant

was removing the remains of some meal from the table, luncheon or dinner; but his master stopped him with a motion of the hand.

"Lay it again, Gervase."

"Not for me," interposed Laura, as she sat down in an arm-chair. "I would prefer not to take anything," she added, to Mr. Carlton.

Gervase went away with his tray. And Mr. Carlton turned to her. "And so you are the young lady my son has married! I wish you health and happiness!"

"You are very kind," said Laura, beginning to take a dislike to Mr. Carlton. She knew how useful some of his hoarded gains would be to them; she hated him for his stinginess in not having helped his son: and she had come down in an impulse that morning to pay him court and make friends with him. But there was something in his calm eye and calm bearing that told her her object would be lost, if that object was the getting him to aid their pockets; and Laura entrenched herself within her own pride, and set herself to dislike him — as she always did dislike anybody who thwarted her.

"I am in London for a few days, Mr. Carlton, and I thought I would come and make your acquaintance before I left it. I did not know it would be disagreeable to you."

"It is not disagreeable to me. I am pleased to see you here. Is Lewis in town with you?"

"As if he would not have come to you if he had been!" retorted Laura. "I was summoned to town on grievous business," she continued, her eye and voice alike softening. "My father was dying. I did not get up in time to see him alive."

"Your father? I beg your pardon, I forget who —"

"The Earl of Oakburn," imperiously answered Laura, feeling excessively offended, and scarcely believing in the forgetfulness.

"The Earl of Oakburn: true. When I read of his death I felt sure that I ought to remember that name by some particular cause, but I forgot that he was the father of my son's wife. You look angry, my dear; but if you had the work on your hands that I have, you would not wonder at my forgetting things. I and Lewis had but scant correspondence on the subject of his marriage, and I am not sure that your father's name was mentioned in it more than once. Your own name is Laura."

"I am Lady Laura," was the answer, given with a flash of impetuosity.

"And a very pretty name it is! Laura! I had a little sister of that name once, who died. Dear me, it seems ages and ages ago to look back upon! And how is Lewis getting on in South Wennock! He ought to be a skilful practitioner by this time; he has the mettle in him if he chooses to put it out."

"He gets on as well as a doctor can do who has his way to make unassisted," returned Laura. "Nobody helps him. He ought to keep a close carriage, but he can't afford it."

If he had afforded it, his wife would have appropriated it to her own use. Driving down in that coroneted carriage with all the signs of rank and wealth about it, was just the pastime acceptable to Laura in her vanity.

"Ah, Lewis must be content to wait for that," remarked Mr. Carlton. "I did not keep a close carriage

until I had been more years in practice than Lewis has. Tell him from me, my dear, that those who know how to win, generally know how to wait."

"I'll not tell him," said Laura, boldly. "I think, sir, you ought to help him."

"Do you, young lady? What does he get by his practice? Six or seven hundred a year?"

"Well, yes; I think he gets that."

"It's more than I got at his age. *And I would recommend him to make it suffice.*"

The peculiar emphasis which accompanied the words, told a tale to Laura: that no help must be expected from Mr. Carlton. Laura threw back her head disdainfully. Only asking it for the sake of him whom she so loved, really careless of money herself, she felt anger rather than disappointment. She rose to leave.

"Your husband knows my disposition, Lady Laura: that I never can be badgered into anything — and you must pardon the word. Tell him I have not altered my will; I shall not alter it if he keeps in my good books; but he must look to his own exertions while I live, not to me."

"I think you are a very unkind father, Mr. Carlton."

"My dear, you can think so if you please," was the equable answer, given in all courtesy. "You don't know your husband's disposition yet. Shall I tell you what he is? He makes, you say, six or seven hundred a year. If I allowed him, from to-day, six or seven hundred on to it, making twelve our fourteen, by the year's end he would find that too little, and ask for fourteen hundred more. Lewis is safe to spend all his

income, no matter from what sources it may be derived; and I don't care to have my hard-earned money wasted in my lifetime."

Laura drew her black lace shawl round her with supercilious meaning, and swept from the room, deaf to offers of wine and other good things. Mr. Carlton followed, and held out his arm. Had it been anyone but her husband's father she would have refused it.

"Where are you staying?" he asked.

"In the house with my dead father," passionately answered Laura. "I should not have quitted it on any errand but this."

"I have been glad to see you, my dear. I shall always be glad to see you and Lewis. Come and stay with me, both of you, at any time. Should business or pleasure bring you to London, Lady Laura, and you can reconcile yourself to this end on the town, make my house your home. You shall be heartily welcome."

He led her out with quite an excess of stately courtesy, bowed her into the waiting carriage, lifted his hat, and stood bareheaded until she had driven away.

"He is a gentleman in manners, with all his meanness," quoth Laura to herself. "Somehow I had feared he might not be. And I can understand now why he and Lewis have been so antagonistic — they are too much like each other."

CHAPTER VII.

The Face Again.

It was the day of the funeral of the Earl of Oakburn. In her dressing-room sat his widow, wearing her deep mourning robes and her white cap, the insignia of her bereft condition. Near to her, in robes of mourning as deep, sat the earl's daughters, Jane, Laura, and Lucy. Lucy the child cried incessantly; Laura ever and anon gave vent to a frantic burst; Jane was tranquil. Tranquil outwardly; and none, save perhaps the countess, suspected the real inward suffering. What with the loss of him, gone from their sight in this world for ever, and the loss of one they knew not how gone, Jane Chesney's grief was too bitterly acute for outward signs; it lay deeper than the surface.

The Earl of Oakburn and the dowager countess were left in graves side by side each other in the large cemetery; and the solicitor to the Oakburn family was coming in with the wills. A copy of that made by the countess was to be read, because it was known that legacies were left to some of those ladies sitting there. The lawyer, Mr. Mole, was a thin man with a white shirt-frill, who surreptitiously took snuff every three minutes from under his handkerchief.

He solaced himself with a good pinch outside the dressing-room door, and went in bowing, two parchments in his hand. Lady Oakburn was not strong enough to get to the apartments below, and the lawyer was received here, as had been arranged. The will of the earl was the one he retained in his hand to read first. He took his seat and opened it.

Lord Oakburn had it not in his power to bequeath much. The estate was charged with the payment of five hundred a year to his eldest daughter, Jane Chesney, for her life; to his second daughter, Laura Carlton, he left his *forgiveness*; and to his third and fourth daughters, Clarice Beauchamp, and Lucy Eleanor, the sum of three thousand pounds each. Lucy was left under the personal guardianship of his wife Eliza, Countess of Oakburn, who was charged with the expense of her education and maintenance; Clarice, when she was found, was to have her home with the countess, if she pleased, and if she did not so please, he prayed his daughter Jane to afford her one. Should it be ascertained that any untoward fate had overtaken Clarice (so ran the words of the will), that she should no longer be living, then the three thousand pounds were to revert to Jane absolutely. Lucy's three thousand were to accumulate until she was twenty-one. A sum of three hundred pounds was to be equally divided at once between his four daughters, "to provide them with decent mourning," Clarice's share to be handed over to Jane, that it might be set aside for her."

Such were the terms of the will, as related to the earl's daughters; the part of it regarding his wife and son (the latter of whom was not born when it was made, though it provided for the contingency) need not be touched upon, for it does not concern us.

When the will was read, Mr. Mole laid it down, took up the copy of that of the dowager countess, and began to read it with scarcely a breath of interval. The old lady, who had plenty of money in her own right, had bequeathed five thousand pounds each to

her grandnieces Jane and Lucy Eleanor Chesney. Jane's five thousand was to be paid over to her within twelve months, Lucy's was to be left to accumulate until she should be of age, both principal and interest. Neither Laura nor Clarice was mentioned in her will. Even to the last the old countess could not forgive Clarice for attempting to get her own living; neither had she forgiven Laura's marriage.

To express the sore feeling, the anger, the resentment of Lady Laura at finding herself passed over both by her father and her aunt, would be difficult. She was of a hasty and passionate temper, something like her father, too apt to give way to it upon trifling occasions, but she did not now. There are some injuries, or what we deem such, which tell so keenly upon the feelings, that they bury themselves in silence, and rankle there. This was one. Laura Carlton made no remark, no observation; she expressed not a word of disappointment, or said that it was such. One lightning flash of anger, which nobody saw but the solicitor, and outward demonstration was over.

The lawyer took four parcels of bank-notes from his pocket-book, each to the amount of seventy-five pounds. Two of these parcels he handed to Lady Jane, her own and Clarice's; one to the countess as the share of Lucy; the other parcel to Lady Laura.

And Laura took the notes without a word. Her indignant fingers trembled to fling them back in Mr. Mole's face; but she did contrive to restrain herself. "He might have left me better off," she breathed to Jane in the course of the evening; and then she bit her tongue for having said so much.

Jane also had her disappointment: but she had

been prepared for it. Not a disappointment as regarded money matters: she was left as well off as she expected to be, and felt grateful to her father for doing so much, and to her aunt for the handsome legacy. Her disappointment related to Lucy. That the child whom she had loved and tended, whom in her heart she believed herself capable of training into the good Christian, the refined gentlewoman at least as efficiently as the countess, should be left away from her care, entrusted to another, was indeed a bitter trial. Jane, like Laura, spoke not of her mortification; but, unlike Laura, she strove to subdue it. "It is but another cross in my tried life," she murmured to herself. "I must take it up meekly, and pray for help to bear it."

"You should have her entirely indeed, did the will allow of it," said the countess to Jane, for she divined the disappointment, and the tears in her eyes proved the genuine fervour with which she spoke. "I love her greatly; but I would not have been so selfish as to keep her from you. She shall visit you as often as you like, Lady Jane; she is more yours than mine."

Jane caught at the words. "Let me take her home with me for a little change, then. She feels the loss greatly, and change of scene will be good for her. She can stay a week or two with me until you are strong again."

"Willingly, willingly," was the answer. "Ask for her when you will, at any time, and she shall go to you. Unless — unless ——" Lady Oakburn suddenly stopped.

"Unless what?" asked Jane.

"Oh, I feel that I scarcely dare to mention it," returned the countess. "I spoke in impulse. Pray pardon me, Lady Jane! My thought was — unless you would come back again and make this your home."

Jane shook her head. "No," she said, "I think I must have a home of my own. I have got used to it, you see. But I will come to you sometimes, and be your guest."

So Lucy went with Jane to South Wennock. They journeyed down on the second day after the funeral. Laura was silent on the way, somewhat resentful, as she brooded bitterly over the ill news she had to carry to her husband. Once she turned round in the carriage and spoke to Jane quite sharply.

"Why did you never tell me you had asked papa about that torn note of Clarice's? Nobody seems to care for me, I think."

Jane Chesney sighed wearily. "I don't know why I did not. Somehow I do not like to talk of Clarice; and it only left the mystery where it was."

They reached Great Wennock in safety. Laura had not apprised her husband of her coming, and there was no carriage in waiting; the disappointment to be inflicted on him had deterred her. The omnibus and one fly stood at the station. Judith was hastening to secure the latter, but was too late. A handsome stripling leaped into it before her. It was Frederick Grey.

"Oh, Master Grey?" she said, in an accent of dismay. He looked tall enough now for Mr. Grey; but Judith adhered to the familiar salutation. "You'll give up the fly, won't you, sir!"

"I daresay, Judith!" returned the young gentleman with a laugh. "There's the omnibus for you."

"It's not for me, Master Frederick. The ladies are here."

He glanced across, caught sight of them, and was out of the fly in an instant, lugging with him a big

box, which he took to the omnibus, and offered the fly to Lady Jane. He stood with his hat in his hand, a frank smile on his pleasant countenance as he pressed them to take it.

"But it is not right to deprive you of it," said Jane. "You had it first."

"What, and leave you the omnibus, Lady Jane! What would you think of me? The jolting won't hurt me; it's rather fun than otherwise. I should walk, if it were not for the rain."

"Have you come from London?"

"Oh no. Only from Lichford."

He helped to place them in the fly, and they were obliged to make room for Judith, for it was raining fast, and Jane would not let her go outside. Lucy gazed at him as he stood there raising his hat when they drove away.

"What a nice face he has!" she exclaimed. "I like him so much, Jane!"

"I declare I forgot to tell him that we saw his father," said Jane. "I must send for him to call."

Mr. Carlton's was first reached. Lady Laura got out, and the fly drove on with the rest towards Cedar Lodge. Mr. Carlton was at home, and he welcomed her with many kisses. It was late, and the tea was on the table; the room, bright with fire, looked cheering after her journey. Mr. Carlton loved her still, and the absence had been felt by him.

"Between Pembury and London you have been away thirteen days, Laura! And I, longing for you all the while, thinking they would never pass!"

"There is no place like home, after all," said Laura. "And oh, Lewis, there's nobody like you! We

stayed over the funeral, you know, and — to — to hear the will read."

"And how are things left?" asked Mr. Carlton. "I suppose you are so rich now, we poor commoners must scarcely dare to touch you with a long pole."

Laura had been sitting before the fire, her feet on the fender, Mr. Carlton leaning caressingly over her. She suddenly sprang up and turned her back upon him, apparently busying herself with some trifles that lay on a side table; she had an inward conviction that her news would not be palatable.

"Laura, I say, I suppose you inherit ten or twenty thousand pounds? The countess dowager was good to you for ten, I should think."

"I was deliberating how I should soften things to you, and I can't do it. I'll tell you the worst at once," she cried, flashing round and meeting him face to face. "I am disinherited, Lewis."

He made no reply: he only looked at her with eager, questioning eyes.

"Papa has not left me a shilling — save a trifle for mourning; it stated in the will that he bequeathed me *his forgiveness*. My aunt has given ten thousand pounds between Jane and Lucy; nothing to me."

A bitter word all but escaped the lips of Mr. Carlton; he managed to suppress it before it was spoken.

"Left you nothing?" he repeated. "Neither of them."

"Seventy-five pounds for mourning — and the 'forgiveness!' Oh, Lewis, it is shameful: it is an awful disappointment; a disgraceful injustice; and I feel it more for you than for myself."

"And Jane?" he asked, after a pause.

"Jane has five hundred a year for life, and five

thousand pounds absolutely. And other moneys contingent upon deaths. What shall we do, Lewis?"

"Make the best of it," replied Mr. Carlton. "There is an old saying, Laura, 'What can't be cured must be endured;' you and I must exemplify it."

She snatched up her bonnet and quitted the room hastily, as if to avoid saying more, leaving Mr. Carlton alone. A change came over his features then, and a livid look, whether called up by anger, or by memory, or by physical pain, appeared on them. The fire played on his face, rendering its features quite clear, although there was no other light in the room. This apartment, if you remember, had two large windows; one looking to the front, one to the side, near the surgery entrance. The front window had been closed for the night; the other had not, possibly Mr. Carlton had a mind to see what patients came at that dusk hour. He stood in one position opposite this window, buried in thoughts called up by the communication of his wife. His eyes were bent on the ground, his hands fell listlessly on either side of him; he had trusted to this inheritance of Laura's to clear them from their imprudently contracted debts. Mr. Carlton so stood for some minutes, and then he lifted his eyes.

Lifted his eyes to rest upon — what? Peering into the fire-lighted room, its nose pressed flat against a pane of the window, was that never-forgotten face. The awful face, whether human or hobgoblin, which had so scared him the night of Mrs. Crane's death, and again the second night in Captain Chesney's garden.

It scared him still. And Mr. Carlton staggered against the wall, as if he would be out of its sight, his suppressed cry of terror resounding through the room.

PART THE SECOND.

CHAPTER VIII.

The Watering-Place.

SEVEN years to look forward to is a vast period of time; to the young it seems almost interminable. It is long in the passing: for we count it by hours, and days, and weeks, and months, and years. But what is it in the retrospect? — a little bubble, as it were, on the ocean; a speck in the span of life. Since the last chapter, seven years have gone over the heads of the actors in this history, and now the reader is invited to meet some of them again.

Seated on the sands of a fashionable and somewhat exclusive English watering-place, was a group of ladies. Some were working as they talked, some were reading, some were enjoying in idleness and silence the fresh breeze that came wafting over the sea, and some were watching the sports of the children in the distance, running hither and thither and making pies in the sand. A bevy of girls had congregated together, rather apart, but still within reach of speech and hearing. They were intent on their own pursuits, their peculiar interests: dress, flirtation, the libraries, the fashionable promenades of the day, and the assemblies in the rooms at night. Just now they seemed inclined to be quarrelsome rather than sociable. Jealousy was creeping in amidst them.

"You may say what you will, Miss Lake," exclaimed one, "but I maintain that he is the most distinguished-looking man staying at Seaford. Am I right or not?" she added, appealing to her companions.

The speaker was a tall, stately girl, with aquiline features, pale and classic. She was the daughter of General and Mrs. Vaughan, and was staying with them at Seaford. The Miss Lake she had replied to was plain and cynical. And Miss Lake, in place of answering, again drew down the corners of her lips.

"I don't care whether he's 'distinguished looking' or not," spoke up a pretty girl, Fanny Darlington. "I know he is the pleasantest man I ever spoke to. And if he is 'distinguished' it does not make him disagreeable. I hate your distinguished-looking men; they are generally vain and unapproachable; two faults that he steers clear of. He danced with me twice last night."

"And not once with Augusta Lake, and that's why she is accusing him this morning."

A slight smile, suppressed out of good manners, appeared on the lips of several. Miss Vaughan was the only one who spoke.

"Dancing goes for nothing. A man may whirl his legs off, dancing with a woman, and yet not care for her: while he may be secretly attached to one, whom he never asks to walk through a quadrille."

"You say that, because he sits at your side in the rooms, and talks to you by the hour together, Helen Vaughan," interposed Fanny Darlington, who had a free tongue, and sometimes used it more than was

quite requisite. "But you will be none the nearer him, for all that. I don't believe he cares two pins for any girl at Seaford."

A tale-telling flush rose to the face of Helen Vaughan. She shook back her head haughtily, as if to intimate that retort would be beneath her.

"Talking about the rooms, though, who was it he was with there last night?" asked Miss Lake. "I have not seen her there before. A lovely girl."

"I'm sure I saw him with no lovely girl at the rooms last night," struck in Helen Vaughan.

"I know who Miss Lake means," cried Fanny Darlington. "She *is* lovely. She sat with a tall, majestic-looking lady, quite a Juno, and he kept coming up to them. I was near when he asked her to dance; she refused, and said her mamma wished her not; and he turned to the Juno, and inquired whether it was true ——"

"A very ugly Juno in face, whatever she may be in figure," interrupted Augusta Lake.

"How you do stop me! The Juno said Yes; she thought it better that (I could not catch the name) should not dance with him, because she would then have no plea for refusing others."

"Some second-rate City people, who would stick themselves up for 'quality,' and say the frequenters of the rooms are not good enough for them," remarked the general's daughter, with a lofty sneer.

"No, they don't look like that; quite another sort of thing," said a young lady quietly, who had not yet spoken. "I think they *are* 'quality,' not would-be."

"Rubbish!" cried Miss Lake. "How do you know anything of them, Mary Miller?"

"I have the use of my eyes, and can observe them as well as you, that's all. You saw that child who came on the sands yesterday morning, with a maid and an old black servant?"

"Well, what of him?"

"In the afternoon I saw her — the young lady — driving about with the same child," returned Miss Miller. "I infer that they are people of consequence."

"How *can* you infer it?" flashed Helen Vaughan, as if the remark disturbed her temper. "Every soul sojourning at Seaford drives out daily. You are turning silly, Mary Miller."

Mary Miller laughed as she answered. In her quiet way she liked to excite the ire of Miss Vaughan. "The carriage was well-appointed," was all she said.

"You may get 'well-appointed' carriages at the hiring-place, by paying six shillings an hour for them," was Miss Vaughan's scornful answer.

"So you may," said Mary Miller. "But the carriage they were in was not hired. The footman had powdered hair and a gold-headed cane; and the silver plates of the harness and the panels of the carriage displayed a coronet."

Had the speaker announced that the harness and panels displayed a live griffin rampant, it could not have aroused more excitement. "A coronet!" broke from the lips of those around.

"An earl's coronet. So if she is an earl's daughter, as we may assume, it would be somewhat *infra dig.* for her to be found dancing in these rooms, liable to be waltzed about by any clerk from London who may pay his subscription to go in — whatever you may say to the contrary, Miss Vaughan."

"It is singular I should not have observed them last night," was Miss Vaughan's remark.

"They did not stay long," said Fanny Darlington; "they seemed to come in more to see what the rooms were like, than to stay. He went out with them, but he came back again. He appeared to know them intimately."

"Some of his patients, no doubt," cried Miss Lake. "Medical men are always —"

"Hush, Augusta! Here he is. Don't ask who the people were."

A tall, slender man was slowly approaching the group. Certainly he was what Miss Vaughan had just described him — distinguished-looking. The thoughtful expression of his intelligent countenance, full of the beauty of intellect, gave him the appearance of being somewhat older than his age, which may have been near five-and-twenty. But it was neither for his fine form nor his handsome face that he was popular, popular with all classes; it was for his charm of manner. Quiet and refined, gentlemanly in bearing and in thought, he yet bore about him that ready frankness of speech, that winning courtesy to others, which is the great passport to favour, and which can never be assumed by those who possess it not.

Do you guess who it was? You have seen him before. It was that impetuous boy of years gone by, Frederick Grey. But Frederick Grey grown into manhood.

The change in the fortunes of Stephen Grey had been wonderful. At least it would have appeared wonderful, but that the rise had been so gradually progressive, one step leading easily and naturally as it

were, to another. Eight years ago, barely so much yet, he had been a general practitioner in South Wennock, the modest dispenser of his own medicines; and now he was Sir Stephen Grey, a baronet, and one of the royal physicians.

A wonderful rise, you will say. In truth it was. But the transition had been, I repeat, easy and gradual. His settling in London was the turning point in his fortunes, and they had continued to rise step by step throughout the subsequent years. Practice first flew in to him, and he obtained a name; how valuable that is to a physician, more especially a London physician, let them tell you; next he had been appointed to attend on royalty, and was knighted by the Queen; and now, about twelve months back, his patent of baronetcy had been made out for "Stephen Grey and his heirs for ever." There was scarcely a medical man in the metropolis who was so popular as Sir Stephen Grey; certainly none who had risen so rapidly.

Frederick, as you know, had been trained to his father's profession. He would soon take his degree as M.D. A break had occurred in his medical studies, for when Sir Stephen found his fortunes rising, he judged it right to afford his son the advantages of a more liberal education, and Frederick was despatched to keep his terms at the Oxford University. No wonder he was sought after by those young ladies on the Seaford sands! — the heir to a baronetcy and the inheritor of wealth — for Sir Stephen was putting by largely! Added to these advantages were his own attractions of person, his high character, his fascinating manners, — the whole combined in one man might well be deemed a prize.

Lady Grey, no stronger in health than she had used to be, had come to Seaford for the sea air, accompanied by her son. They had been there a fortnight now, and Mr. Frederick, as you perceive, had not failed to make himself a mark of interest; though probably using no effort of his own in the process.

He walked slowly towards those susceptible young ladies, and a change came over them all: that change from apathy to interest which the presence of such a man is sure to bring. Perhaps there was not a girl sitting there but would have been glad to be his chosen, what with his own attractions and his fair prospects in life.

He shook hands with some, he chatted with others, he had a pleasant look and word for all; but Helen Vaughan contrived to monopolize him — as she generally did. He thought nothing yet of her doing so, for he was accustomed to the homage of women. He never suspected she had any particular motive in it; most certainly he did not suspect that she was permitting herself to become seriously attached to him.

"How is Lady Grey?" called out Fanny Darlington.

"Thank you," he replied, "she is not well this morning. I begged her not to think of coming on the sands to-day."

"How vexatious!" exclaimed Miss Vaughan. "Vexatious that she should be ill, and vexatious on my own account," she added, with a fascinating smile. "You see this work that I am doing, Mr. Grey?"

"Very complicated work it seems to be," was his laughing reply, as he glanced at the fragile fabric of threads she held out to him.

"I cannot get on with it, do you know. I am doing it under Lady Grey's instructions, and cannot tell which part to take up next. If I thought mamma would not mind my walking alone through the streets, I would go to your house, and take further instructions from her. Is she well enough to see friends?" continued the young lady, quickly.

"Quite well enough."

"I think I must go to her, then. It is so tiresome to be at a stand-still. Besides, I am working against time; this is for a wedding present."

"I can tell you how to go on with it, if you choose," interrupted Augusta Lake. "There's not the least necessity for your troubling Lady Grey."

Helen Vaughan shook her head dubiously. "But if you should tell me wrong? — and I had the work to pick out again! No, I would rather trust to Lady Grey, as she has shown me all throughout. Would it be troubling her too much, Mr. Grey?" appealing to him with her handsome eyes.

"On the contrary, I think my mother would be glad to receive you," he replied. "On these monotonous mornings, when she is confined to the sofa, she is often pleased at the sight of a visitor."

Helen Vaughan rose, but she did not move away; she stood where she was, and seemed to be lost in perplexed deliberation.

"I scarcely know what to be at; mamma has so great a dislike to our walking through the streets alone."

Augusta Lake's lip curled scornfully, and she did not take any pains to hide it.

"Will you accept of my escort?" asked the gen-

tleman of Miss Vaughan. Could he say anything less?

"Oh, thank you!" exclaimed Helen, with a rosy flush. "Though I am extremely sorry to give you the trouble, Mr. Grey."

He had taken a step or two by her side when he found himself impeded. A little pale lad had come up, and was pulling him backwards. He wore a plain brown-holland tunic dress, and his straw hat had a bit of straw-coloured ribbon tied round it. There was nothing about the child to tell his quality or condition; his attire might have been equally worn by one of no degree, or by a son of her Majesty the Queen.

"Hey, Frank! Where did you spring from?"

"Mamma's there. She said I might run to you."

"Who is that child, Mr. Grey?" came the eager inquiry, for the gossiping young ladies had recognised him for the one of whom they had been making mention.

Mr. Grey caught the boy in his arms and perched him on his shoulder.

"Tell who you are, Frank."

Master Frank did not choose to speak; he was shy. One hand stole round Frederick Grey's neck; the fingers of the other he inserted in his own mouth.

"The child was here yesterday with a black servant," began Miss Lake, "but —"

"It was Pompey," interrupted the boy, finding his tongue. "Put me down, please, Mr. Grey; I want to go for my spade."

"There you are, then," he returned, depositing him on his legs. "But, Frank, I am ashamed of you. Not to tell your name when you are asked it!"

"It's Frank," said the boy, running away over the sand.

"Who is he really, Mr. Grey?"

"Lord Oakburn."

"Lord Oakburn! The young Earl of Oakburn, who was born when his father died?"

"The same," said Mr. Grey. He is a somewhat delicate boy, and Lady Oakburn has brought him here for a month's sea-bathing."

"It was his mother we saw you so amiable with at the rooms last night, then?" cried Miss Lake. "And the young lady — who was she?"

"A very lovely girl; quite charming to look upon," interposed Fanny Darlington rather maliciously, as she stole a glance at Miss Vaughan. "Who was she, Mr. Grey?"

"His sister, Lady Lucy Chesney."

"Are they patients of yours, Mr. Grey?" asked Helen Vaughan, in a cold tone.

"Of Sir Stephen's; not of mine," he answered, laughing.

"By the way, Mr. Grey, I thought you expected Sir Stephen down last Sunday."

"We expected him on Saturday, but he was unable to come. He will be here next Saturday, if not prevented again."

The little lord ran up again, spade in hand.

"Mr. Grey, Lucy says I am to tell you we have heard from town."

"Is Lucy there?" suddenly responded Mr. Grey, turning his head. "She told me she —"

The words died away with the steps of the speaker; for he strode off, quite oblivious to any recollection of

Miss Vaughan. At some distance, tracing characters on the sands with her parasol, in a cool and pretty muslin dress, stood an elegant girl of middle height and graceful bearing, her features inexpressibly refined and beautiful, her complexion bright and delicate. It was Lucy Chesney: the little girl of the short frocks and white-tipped drawers had become this lovely young woman of nineteen. The blushes rose to her face in so obvious a degree as Frederick Grey approached her, that they might have told a tale, had any one been there to read it. Miss Vaughan looked on from the distance, her heart sinking, her lips paling: if ever she saw the signs of mutual love, she believed she saw them then.

Miss Vaughan was not deceived. Love, and love in no measured degree, had long ago sprung up between Frederick Grey and Lucy Chesney. That introduction of Stephen Grey to the Countess of Oakburn by Lady Jane — though indeed we ought to give Judith the credit of it — had led to a personal intimacy between the families, which had ripened into a close and lasting friendship. Lady Oakburn, poor for her rank, living a retired life in the house at Portland Place, educating Lucy, training her little boy, had been more inclined to form quiet friendships than to frequent the gay society of the world. A little gaiety now Lucy was out — and she had been presented this past spring — but the long friendship with the Greys could not be superseded by all the gaiety in the world. It had brought forth its fruits, that friendship; for Lucy Chesney's heart had gone out for all time to that attractive young man, now bending to her to whisper his honeyed words.

Medical men have their prejudices in favour of certain watering-places, some patronising one place, some another. Sir Stephen Grey's pet place was Seaford. His wife generally visited it once a year; in short, Sir Stephen recommended it to all his patients, especially to those whose maladies were more imaginary than real. It was he who had said to Lady Oakburn, not ten days ago yet, "Take the boy to Seaford." The boy, young Frank, was but sickly, and his mother, as a matter of course, was very anxious. The boy had the sturdy independence of his father, and the magnificent dark eyes, the plain good sense of his mother. "There's no reason to be fidgety over him," Sir Stephen would say; he'll grow into a strong man in time." But Lady Oakburn was fidgety in that one particular, and Sir Stephen had this year ordered the boy to Seaford — Sir Stephen having no conception that the mandate would be a particularly welcome one to his son and Lucy Chesney, Lady Oakburn as little; for they had been utterly blind to the attachment that was taking root under, as may be said, their very noses. Talk of beetles being blind, men and women are far more so.

He went up to her, holding out his hand, and the cheeks wore the loveliest carmine flush as he bent to her with his whispered words. Very common-place words, though, and there was no apparent necessity for her blushes, or for his sweet, low tones. Their love-making had not yet gone on to open avowal.

"You told me you were not coming here to-day, Lucy."

"I thought we were not. Mamma said it would be

too hot, but she changed her mind. We had a note from Sir Stephen this morning."

"Ah! What about?"

"He has obtained the information for us regarding those German baths. It is very favourable, and mamma says now she wishes she had gone to them instead of coming to Seaford."

An interchanged glance from between their eyelashes, shy on Lucy's part, speaking worlds on his, and Lucy's eyes at least were dropped again. Lady Oakburn's going to the German baths instead of to Seaford would not have been acceptable to either.

"But, as Lady Oakburn is here, I suppose she will remain?" he said.

"I think so, now. It is only July, you know, and there may be time for Germany later. Mamma says we must remain a month, for she has written to ask Jane to come to us. At least, we must remain if Jane accepts the invitation."

"I hope she will!" involuntarily exclaimed Frederick. "Did Sir Stephen say whether he should come down on Saturday, do you know, Lucy?"

"I cannot tell. I did not read his letter. Mamma read it to me, but I don't know whether she read it all. Sir Stephen ——"

"Mr. Frederick Grey, Helen bade me ask whether you had forgotten that she is waiting? She says perhaps it is inconvenient to you to keep your promise."

Frederick Grey turned to behold a girl of ten, Helen Vaughan's sister. Helen Vaughan had watched the speakers with a resentful spirit and jealous eye. It was more than her chafed temper could bear, and

she called her sister from the attractions of the sand pies, and gave her the message.

Following herself slowly on the heels of the little girl. As Frederick looked round, she had nearly come up to them. The child flew off to the pies again, and Helen spoke.

"It may be inconvenient to you now, Mr. Grey?"

"By no means. I shall be happy to accompany you."

The two young ladies stood, scanning each other's faces, waiting — as it seemed to him — for an introduction. He knew that Miss Vaughan's position, as the daughter of a general officer, would quite justify his making it to Lucy.

"Miss Vaughan: Lady Lucy Chesney."

Two cold distant curtsies, and the ceremony was over. The general's daughter was the first to speak.

"Not Miss Vaughan; Miss Helen Vaughan. I have an elder sister. Her health was indifferent, and she stayed behind us at Montreal to come home later."

Montreal? Vaughan? The names struck some nearly forgotten chord in the memory of Lucy, in connection with a Miss Beauchamp who had gone out to Montreal as governess, and who turned out not to be Clarice. She made no comment, however, no inquiry; the young lady's haughty face did not take her fancy. Neither perhaps did her intimacy with Frederick Grey.

A few interchanged words, cold and civil, two more distant curtsies, and the young ladies had parted: and Miss Vaughan was walking in the direction of the town, side by side with Frederick Grey.

"I don't like her a bit," thought Lucy, as she

turned away. "I wonder how long Frederick has known her?"

In a quiet spot, apart from others, sat Lady Oakburn. The seven years had passed over her face lightly; and she looked nearly as young, — more magnificent than when, as Miss Lethwait, the captivated earl had asked her to become his wife. A hazardous venture, perhaps, but one that had turned out well: Lady Oakburn was a step-mother in a thousand. Seated by her side, having rushed up to claim acquaintance with her on hearing Frederick Grey's announcement, was a Mrs. Delcie. The acquaintance between them was very slight. They had met once or twice in some of the crowded rooms of London; but you know it is not all of us who get the chance to show to our sea-bathing friends that we are on speaking terms with a countess. Mrs. Delcie appeared inclined to make herself at home, and was already initiating Lady Oakburn into the politics of the place.

"You look tired, my dear child," exclaimed Lady Oakburn, when Lucy came up. "It is hot here. Would you rather go home?"

"I am not all tired, mamma. I think Frank will be, by the way he is running about."

"It will do him good," returned Lady Oakburn. "You know what Sir Stephen says — that we wrap him up in lavender."

"Is that Sir Stephen Grey?" interposed Mrs. Delcie. "You know the Greys personally, perhaps?"

"Very well indeed," replied Lady Oakburn.

"I don't. But I should like to. I must get an introduction to Lady Grey. What a handsome young

fellow is that son of theirs? *He* will not get away from Seaford heart-whole."

The words were spoken emphatically, and Lady Oakburn looked up with some curiosity. Lucy, who had sat down by her step-mother, bent her face and her parasol, and began her favourite pastime of tracing characters on the sands as she listened.

"That handsome girl, Helen Vaughan, has been making a dead set at him ever since he came here, and he does not respond to it unwillingly," continued Mrs. Delcie. "Some think that they are already engaged; but I don't know."

"I do not think that likely," observed Lady Oakburn.

"Why?"

"From what I know of Frederick Grey, he is not the man to choose a young lady for a wife, after knowing her for a fortnight only."

"You would think it likely if you saw them together. He is ever with her, evidently smitten; on the sands, in the promenade, in the rooms, there he is by the side of Helen Vaughan. Some fancy his profession might be a bar in the general's eyes; not it, say I: there's the baronetcy to set off against it. It is to be hoped he will have her, for she's dying for him."

Lucy's face turned white, and the parasol went scoring its marks according to its own will. *Was* it true, this? For the last few months she had been living as in a blissful dream of Eden: one that she had not cared to analyse. All she knew was, that the step of Frederick Grey sent her whole life-blood coursing through her veins, that his presence brought

to her a rapturous bliss; his voice was sweeter than the sweetest music, the touch of his hand thrilled her every fibre. The sunny spring-tide of love had come for Lucy Chesney, and she had been glad that it should never pass.

Love took up the glass of time and turned it in his glowing hands;

Every moment, lightly shaken, ran itself in golden sands.

Love took up the harp of life, and smote on all its cords with might;

Smote the chord of self, which, trembling, passed in music out of sight.

CHAPTER IX.

Changes.

LADY JANE CHESNEY sat in her quiet drawing-room in the old house on the Rise. The Rise was a suburb of importance now; mansions, and villas with two entrance gates, and dwellings with a miniature lodge, and other grandeur, had sprung up. Seven years make change in a place.

They had not made much in Jane Chesney. The former carking care, the disappointment, the trouble had passed; and these peaceful last years of quiet had smoothed her fair countenance instead of ageing it. One source of care alone was hers; and that had grown into a care of the past — the anxiety touching her sister Clarice. Strange as it may seem to have to write it, strange as it *was* in fact, nothing whatever had been heard of Lady Clarice Chesney. Not so much as a word, a hint, a sign had come to Jane of her in any way during the past seven years. Even Mrs. West — the only link, as it had seemed to Lady Jane between Clarice in being and Clarice lost — had disappeared. Not disappeared in the same sense that Clarice had. Mrs. West had given up her house in

Gloucester Terrace and gone to reside on the Continent for the benefit of her children's education. Her husband went with her. A successful man in business, he had realised a competency earlier than most men realise it, and had (perhaps wisely) retired from it altogether. So that Jane had seen nothing of the Wests since the short interview with Mr. West at the period of Lord Oakburn's death.

No, Clarice Chesney remained lost; her fate a mystery amidst the many mysteries of life; and time had flung its healing wings over the heart of Jane, and the anxiety and sorrow were now all of the past. It is true that moments of dismay would come over Jane, like unto that first waking of ours in the early morning, when all the old horror would return to her; the strange disappearance, the vivid features of the dreaded dream, the wearing suspense when she and the earl were afterwards searching for Clarice; and she would remember how faithfully she had promised her father to make the seeking Clarice the one chief object of her life. In these moments she would ask herself — was she doing so? But in truth she saw not anything that *could* be done, for all sources of inquiry had been exhausted at the time. Should any clue ever turn up, though it were but the faintest shadow of one, then Jane would act; act with all her best energy, and strive to unravel it. A voice within her sometimes made itself heard, whispering that that time would come.

But the seven years had gone on, bringing none; and seven years at Lady Jane Chesney's age seems a long span in the lease of life. The signs of care had left her face; it was of placid gentleness; and

existence in a calm way had charms yet for Jane Chesney.

Not that little temporary worries never intruded themselves; I do not know any one to whom they do not come. Even on this morning something of the sort is troubling Jane as she sits in her cool and shady drawing-room, where the sun does not penetrate until the noon is high. A letter has been delivered to her from Seaford from the Countess of Oakburn, and its contents are perplexing her, as her fair brow bends over it for about the twentieth time.

Lady Oakburn had written to her some days previously, inviting her to come and stay with them at Seaford. Jane declined it. She did not feel inclined to go from home just then, she wrote, but that perhaps, if all went well, she would spend Christmas with them in London. Jane's former antipathy to the countess had worn away: she truly esteemed her, and they were the best of friends. Her refusal was duly despatched, and a few days passed on: but this morning had brought another letter from the countess, containing a few urgent lines of entreaty. "Do come to me at once, dear Lady Jane. I ask you for Lucy's sake. She is quite well; but I must have some advice from you respecting her."

The words puzzled Jane. Lady Oakburn had written in evident anxiety; in — Jane thought — pain; certainly in haste. Her letters were always so sensible and self-possessed that there could be no doubt something unusual had seriously disturbed her, and that it concerned Lucy.

"I shall go," decided Jane, as she folded the letter for the last time, and placed it in her pocket. "I do

not like suspense, and I shall go to-day. We can get away by the three-o'clock train."

She rang for Judith, to give her the necessary orders, and in the same moment saw the carriage of her sister Laura stop at the gate. A grand carriage was Lady Laura's now, with its bedecked servants and all sorts of show and frippery attached to it, quite after Laura's own vain heart. Mr. Carlton the elder had quitted the world, and bequeathed his gains to his son; and none in all South Wennock were so grand as Mr. and Lady Laura Carlton.

She came in: the imperious look, which had now grown habitual, very conspicuous on her face; her robe of pale green morning silk rustling and glistening, her Chantilly veil of white flung back. Jane could see in a moment that something had crossed her. Something often did cross her now. The sisters were not very intimate. Jane maintained her original resolution, never to put her foot within Mr. Carlton's house; and her intercourse with her sister was confined to these chance visits of Laura's. Laura sat down upon the nearest chair, flinging her dainty parasol of lace upon the table.

"Jane, I wish to goodness you'd let me have Judith!"

The words were spoken without any superfluous ceremony of greeting. When Laura was put out, she was as sparing of courtesy as ever had been the sailor-earl, her father. Jane looked at her in surprise.

"Let you have Judith, Laura! I don't know what you mean."

"That Stiffing has nearly driven me wild this morning with her stupidity," returned Lady Laura,

alluding to her maid, "and if I could only get some one in her place to suit me, she should go this very day. Would you believe, Jane, would you *believe*, that she has gone and sent that lovely gold-coloured scarf of mine to the dyer's?"

"She must have done it in a mistake," observed Jane.

"But, good gracious, who but an idiot would make such a mistake?" retorted Laura. "I told her to send my brown scarf to be dyed, and she says she thought I meant my gold one, and she sent it, and it has come home this morning converted into a wretched thing of a black! I could have beaten her in my vexation. I wish you'd spare me Judith, Jane. She would suit me, I know, better than anybody else."

Jane shook her head. Perhaps she admired the coolness of the request. She said very little; but that little was to the effect that she could not spare Judith, and Laura saw she meant it.

"Don't part with a maid who suits you in other ways for one sole error, Laura," was her advice. "At any rate, I cannot give you Judith. I am going to take her away with me this very day. I am going to Seaford."

"To Seaford!" returned Laura, speaking as crossly as she felt. "Why, it was only last week when I met you in High Street you told me Lady Oakburn had invited you to Seaford, and you had declined to go."

"I know I did. But I have had another letter from her this morning, and have altered my mind. I shall go to-day."

Laura gave her head a toss in her old fashion. "I'd not be as changeable as you, Jane. Then you won't give me Judith?"

"I am very sorry to deny you, Laura," was Jane's answer, "but I could not do without her."

Laura sat tapping the carpet with her foot. "I have a great mind to go with you," said she at length. "I am sure Lady Oakburn would be glad to see me."

"But I shall stay there a month."

"What of that?"

"Mr. Carlton might not like to spare you for so long."

"Do you suppose I study what he likes?" asked Laura, a scowl of bitter superciliousness crossing her face. "But I won't go: I should miss the races here."

For South Wennock was a gay place now, and held its own yearly races, at which nobody enjoyed themselves more than Lady Laura Carlton. These races brought to them some of the good county families, and Laura was in her element, keeping open house. She rose, said a cold adieu to Jane; she was capricious as the wind; and swept out to her carriage with pouting lips.

From that one little remark above of my Lady Laura's, the reader will infer that the domestic sunshine formerly brightening the daily life of Mr. Carlton and his wife, had not continued uninterruptedly to illumine it. Things might have been happier with Laura perhaps had she had children; but since that first infant, which had died at its birth, there had been no signs of any. Happier, in so far as that she would have had occupation, — a legitimate interest to fill her thoughts; but it might not have made any difference to the terms on which she now lived with her husband. And the terms were not, on the whole, those of harmony.

The original fault was his. However haughty,

sullen, passionate Laura might have become; however aggravating in her manner to him as she often now was, let it emphatically be repeated that the fault lay originally with him. It was but a repetition of the story too often enacted in real life, though not so often disclosed to the world. Laura had loved Mr. Carlton with impassioned fervour; she had so continued to love him for three or four years; and then she was rudely awakened. Not awakened by the gradual process of disenchantment, but suddenly, violently, at one fell stroke.

It is the *spécialité* of man to be fickle; it is the *spécialité* of some men to stoop to sin. Perhaps few men living were more inclined by nature to transgress social laws than was Mr. Carlton. He had been lax in his notions of morality all his life; he was lax still. His love for his wife had been wild and passionate as a whirlwind; but these whirlwinds, you know, never last. Certain rumours reflecting on Mr. Carlton got whispered about; escapades now and again, in which there was, it must be confessed, as much truth as scandal, and they unfortunately penetrated to the ear of his wife. The town ignored them of course: was obligingly willing to ignore them; Lady Laura did not. She contrived to acquire pretty good proof of their foundation, and they turned her love for her husband into something very like hatred. It has had the same effect, you may be aware, in real life. Since then she had been unequal in her temper. The first burst of the storm over, the cruel shock in some degree lived down, she had subsided into an indifferent sort of specious civility: but this calm was occasionally varied by bursts of passionate anger, not in the least agree-

able to Mr. Carlton. Personally he was loving and indulgent to Laura still. No open rupture had taken place to cause a nine days' marvel; before the world they were as sufficiently cordial with each other as are most husbands and wives; but Laura Carlton was an unhappy woman, looking upon herself as one miserably outraged, miserably deceived. Little wonder was there at the remark to her sister, "Do you suppose I should study what he likes?"

Lady Jane, attended by her faithful maid, drove to Great Wennock to take one of the afternoon trains. The road was another thing that had been changed by the hand of Time. The old ruts and hillocks and stones had gone, and it was now almost as smooth as a bowling-green. As they entered the waiting-room, the omnibus renowned in this history, which still plied between the two towns, and now boasted of a rather more civil driver, and of new springs and of sundry outer embellishments, was drawn up in its place outside, waiting for the passengers from the coming train. Had Lady Jane and Judith turned their eyes to it in passing — which they did not — they might have seen seated in it a remarkably stout lady. It was an old acquaintance of ours, Mrs. Pepperfly. She had been on an errand to Great Wennock, and was taking advantage of the omnibus to return.

The train came up. It set down those of its passengers who wished to alight, and took up those who wished to go on by it. Amidst the latter were Lady Jane and Judith.

Mrs. Pepperfly had been enjoying a good dinner, comprising a proportionable supply of beer. The result was, that she felt drowsy. Only herself was in

the omnibus, and she sat nodding and blinking, when a slight stir at its door aroused her.

A passenger from the train had come up to take her place in the omnibus. She was a hard-featured, respectable-looking woman, dressed in good widow's mourning, and she had with her a little boy and some luggage. She took her seat opposite Mrs. Pepperfly, and placed the child by her side; he was a delicate-looking lad of perhaps six years, with a fair skin and light flaxen hair. Mrs. Pepperfly, skilled in looks, detected at once that he was not in good health. But he was more restless than are most sickly children, turning his head about from the door to the side window incessantly as different objects attracted his attention.

"Oh, mother, mother, look there!"

The words were spoken in the most excited manner. Two soldiers in their red clothes had come forth from the station; and this it was which caused the words. The mother administered a reprimand.

"There you go again! I never saw such a child! One would think soldiers were some of the world's wonders, by the fever you put yourself into at sight of them!"

"I have knowed some children go a'most wild at sight of a red-coat!" interposed Mrs. Pepperfly, without ceremony.

"Then he's one," replied the widow. "He'd rather look at a soldier any day than at a penny peep-show."

The omnibus started, having waited in vain for other passengers. The little boy, probably seeing nothing in the road, or the fields on either side of it, to attract his admiration, nestled against his mother

and was soon asleep. Mrs. Pepperfly had also begun to nod again, when the stranger bent over to her with a question.

"Do you happen to know a lady living about here of the name of Crane?"

Mrs. Pepperfly started and opened her eyes, hardly awake yet.

"Crane?" said she.

"I want to find the address of a lady of that name. Do you know a Mrs. Crane in South Wennock?"

"No, mum," answered Mrs. Pepperfly, her reminiscences of a certain episode of the past aroused, and not pleasantly, at the question. "I never knowed but one lady o' that name; and that was but for two or three days, eight year and more ago, for she went out of the world promiscuous."

The widow paused a minute as if she had lost her breath. "How do you mean?" she asked.

"She was ill, mum, and I was the very nurse that was nursing of her, and she was getting on all beautiful when a nasty accident fell in, which haven't been brought to light yet, and it put her into her grave in St. Mark's Churchyard."

"Was she hurt?" exclaimed the widow, hastily.

"No, nothing of that," answered Mrs. Pepperfly, shaking her head. "The wrong medicine was given to her: it was me myself what poured it out and put it to her dear lips, little thinking I was giving her her death: and I wish my fingers had been bit off first!"

The stranger stared hard at Mrs. Pepperfly, as if she could not understand the words, or as if she doubted the tale. "Where did this happen?" she said at length. "Was she in lodgings in South Wennock?"

"She were in lodgings in Palace Street," was the reply. "She come all sudden to the place, knowing nobody and nobody knowing her, just as one would suppose a strange bird might drop down from the skies. And she took the Widow Gould's rooms in Palace Street, and that very night her illness come on, and it was me that was called in to nurse her."

"And is she *dead*?" repeated the stranger, unable apparently to take in the tidings.

"She have been lying ever since in a corner of St. Mark's Churchyard. She died the following Monday night. Leastways she were killed," added Mrs. Pepperfly.

The stranger altered the position of the sleeping child, and bent nearer to the nurse. "Tell me about it," she said.

"It's soon told," was the answer. "The doctor had sent in a composing draught. He had sent one in on the Saturday night and on the Sunday night; she were restless, poor thing, though doing as well as it's possible for a body to do; but she were young, and she would get laughing and talking, and the doctors they don't like that — and I'll not say but there's cases where it's dangerous. Well, on the Monday night there was sent in another of these sleeping draughts, as the doctor thought, and as us thought, and I gave it to her, and it turned out to be poison, and her poor innocent soul went out after swallowing it; and mine a'most went out too with the fright."

"Poison!"

"The draught were poisoned, and it killed her."

"But how came the doctor to send a poisoned draught?" asked the stranger in a passionate tone.

"Ah, there it is," returned Mrs. Pepperfly. "He says he didn't send it so — that it went out from him good wholesome physic. But, as me and the Widow Gould remarked to each other at the time, If he sent it out pure, what should bring the poison in it afterwards?"

"What was done to the doctor?"

"Nothing. There was a inquest sat upon her body, as I've cause to remember, for they had me up at it: but the jury and the crowner thought the doctor had not make the mistake nor put the poison into the draught — which he had stood to it from the first he didn't."

"Then who did put it in?"

"It's more nor I can tell," replied Mrs. Pepperfly. "I know I didn't."

"And was no stir made about it?" continued the stranger, wiping her face, which was growing heated.

"Plenty of stir, for that matter, but nothing come of it. The police couldn't follow it up proper, for they didn't know where she came from, or even what her crissen name was: and nobody has never come to inquire after her from that day to this."

"Who was the doctor that attended her?" was the next question; and it was put abruptly.

"Mr. Stephen Grey. One might say indeed that two was attending of her, him and Mr. Carlton: but Mr. Carlton only saw her once or twice; he was away from the town. She had Mr. Stephen Grey through-out, and it was him that sent the draught."

"Does he bear a good character?" asked the stranger, harshly.

Mrs. Pepperfly opened her eyes. "What, Mr.

Stephen Grey? Why, mum, nobody never bore a better character in this world, whether as a doctor or a man. Except that mistake — if it was him that made it — he never had a thing whispered against him before or since. He left the place after that to settle in London, and he have got on, they say, like a house a-fire. I know this: he'd give his right hand to find out the rights about it."

"Is he a young man — an unmarried man?"

"Be you and me young and unmarried?" retorted Mrs. Pepperfly; for the want of sense in the question (as it sounded to her in her superior knowledge) excited her ire. "Him? He have been married this five-and-twenty year, and he's a'most as old as we be. There! There's the very churchyard where she's lying."

Mrs. Pepperfly pointed to the opposite side of the street which they were now approaching. And the stranger, in her eagerness to look at the churchyard, found her face brought violently in contact with the side of the omnibus, as it was whirled round the corner by the driver, to draw up at the door of the Red Lion.

CHAPTER X.

Rivalry.

WAS it a scene of enchantment? — such as those we read of in the Arabian Nights? Indeed it seemed like it. The assembly-rooms, brilliant with light, with garlands, with mirrors and beautiful statues, were thrown open to the outside, where the hanging terraces, redolent with the perfume of the night flowers, reposed so calmly in the moonlight. If only from the contrast,

the scene would have told upon the heart and upon the senses. The garish rooms, speaking of the world and its votaries, hot, noisy, turbulent in their gaiety; the calm cool night, lying clear and still under the starred canopy of the blue heavens! Fairy forms were flitting in the rooms, strains of the sweetest music charmed the ear; hearts were beating, pulses quickening; and care, in that one dizzy spot, seemed to have gone from the world.

These Seaford assembly-rooms were made gay for that one night. A fête in aid of some local charity had been projected, and the first names amidst the visitors at Seaford were down as patrons of it. The Right Honourable the Countess of Oakburn's headed the list, and amidst the rest might be read those of Lieutenant-General and Mrs. Vaughan. The Vaughans and the Oakburn family had become acquainted. General Vaughan's eldest son came to join them at Seaford, and he remembered his one night of introduction years before to Lord Oakburn's house. Lady Grey and Mrs. Vaughan were also intimate — the intimacy, you know, that we form at watering-places, warm while it lasts, but ceasing when the sojourn is over. So Lucy Chesney and Miss Helen Vaughan had been brought into repeated contact, and — if the truth must be told — desperately jealous were they of each other. Lucy heard the rumours obtaining in Seaford — that Mr. Frederick Grey was "in love" with Helen Vaughan. She looked around her and saw, or thought she saw, many proofs to confirm it. That Frederick Grey was the one object of attraction to half the young ladies staying at Seaford, could not be disputed; the chief part of his time was spent with them without any

seeking of his own. *They sought him*; they laid their pretty little plans to meet him, to form engagements with him, to get him to their side. In the morning lounge, on the sands, in the walk, in the ride or drive of the afternoon, in some of the réunions of gaiety of the night, there would he be with some or other of them; more especially would he be with Helen Vaughan. Do not fancy he disliked it, although it was the fault of the young ladies more than of his; Frederick Grey was no more insensible to the charms of pretty girls than are other men.

And Lucy saw all this; saw it with the bitterest pain, with fierce resentment. It might be, that things looked a great deal worse to her than they would have looked to unprejudiced eyes, for jealousy, you remember, makes the food it feeds on. He had not spoken to her; he had not told her that he loved; and it may be excused to Lucy if she took up the notion that he never had loved her; that the sweet consciousness that it was so, recently filling her heart, had been altogether a mistake; and her cheeks tingled at the thought with a scarlet shame.

Frederick Grey himself helped on the delusion. Lucy's manners had so altered to him, had become so unaccountably cold and haughty, that he was avoiding her in very resentment.

Ah, who knew? — the intricacies of this subtle heart of ours are so cunningly profound! — it might be that this haunting of the other demoiselles, this making love to them — if his flirtations could be called such — was but done to plague Lucy Chesney, and bring her allegiance back to him. In the midst of it all, Lady Oakburn had become acquainted with

the state of affairs. By the merest accident, her eyes, so long shut, were suddenly opened, and she saw that Lucy loved Frederick Grey. She had little doubt that he returned the love; she as little doubted that the passion was of some standing. There occurred to her dismayed memory the intimacy that had subsisted between them all in town; the interviews without number, in which he could have made love to Lucy had he chosen so to do.

The countess sat down aghast. She liked Frederick Grey herself beyond any one she knew; but what of Lady Jane? Would *she* deem him a suitable *parti* for Lucy? Would she not rather condemn him as entirely unsuitable? — and how should she herself answer to Lady Jane for her lax care of Lucy? Care? — as applied to love? Lady Oakburn in her self-condemnation forgot that the one is rarely a preventive to the other. She did the best that she could do. In her open straightforwardness she wrote that hasty letter to summon Lady Jane; Lucy meanwhile remaining entirely ignorant of the discovery and its results. Lucy had enough on her heart just then, if not on her hands, in looking out for food for her new jealousy.

It was not an ordinary evening at ordinary seaside gala-rooms, but a grand fête for which the rooms had for once been lent, and to which everybody of note flocked, not only of the temporary visitors, but of the local, standing society. Much had been made of it; and the arrangements were of that complete, it may be said superb, nature, not often seen. You may be very sure the ladies' toilettes were not behind the rest in attraction.

Lady Oakburn and Lucy arrived late. So late indeed that Miss Helen Vaughan was saying to herself they certainly would not come. The little Earl of Oakburn was with them. The little earl was indulged a great deal more than was good for him, especially by Lucy, and his mamma had yielded to the young gentleman's demand of "going to the ball," upon the condition that when he had taken a twenty minutes' peep at it, he should retire quietly and be conveyed home by Pompey. The delay in their arrival was caused by their expectancy of Lady Jane. Jane had telegraphed to the countess that she was on her road, and they waited to receive her. But it grew late, and she had not come.

As Lucy entered the rooms, her eyes were dazzled for a moment by the blaze of light, and then they ranged themselves abroad in search of — what? Exactly in search of what she saw, and nothing less; of what her jealous heart had pictured. Whirling round the room in the mazy waltz, to the tones of the sweetest music, his arm encircling her waist, his hand clasping hers, his eyes bent upon her with admiration, or what looked like it, and his voice lowered to whispered tones of softness, were Frederick Grey and Helen Vaughan. A pang, almost as of death, shot through Lucy's heart, and she shivered in her excess of pain.

Helen Vaughan looked well. She always did look so. Tall, regal, stately, fair: a fit companion for the distinguished Frederick Grey — and many were thinking so. But what was her beauty, compared to that of Lucy Chesney? — with her retiring grace, her exquisite features, her complexion of damask purity,

and her sweet brown eyes? Both were dressed in white; robes soft, flowing, fleecy as a cloud; Miss Vaughan displayed an elaborate set of ornaments, emeralds set in much gold; Lucy wore only pearls, the better taste for a young lady. Both of them looked very very beautiful, and the room thought so; Helen Vaughan was praised in words, but a murmur of hushed admiration followed Lucy Chesney.

The waltz was over, and Frederick Grey made his way to Lucy. She affected not to see him; she had her head turned, and was talking volubly to Fanny Darlington: he had to touch her at length to obtain her attention.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," she coldly said. "Good evening."

"How late you are, Lucy! The dance for which you were engaged to me is over."

"I supposed it would be," she said, in her bitter resentment. "I told you at the time I promised that it was more than probable I should not perform."

"You will dance this next with me. I think it is to be the Lancers."

Was she deaf? She made no reply whatever, and her head was turned from him. At that moment, a gentleman was brought up and introduced to her; a little man who looked as if he had not two ideas in his whole brain, with an eyeglass popped artistically in his eye, and his sandy hair parted down the middle, back and front. She did not catch his name; it was Viscount Somebody, one of the county notabilities; but she put her hand within his arm when he solicited the honour of it for the forthcoming quadrille, and was moving away with him.

Mr. Frederick Grey's blood boiled up, dyeing his brow crimson. He laid his hand on Lucy's arm to detain her.

"I asked you first, Lucy."

She recoiled from the touch, as if there had been contamination in it. "I beg your pardon, did you speak to me?"

"I asked you for this quadrille. You are engaged to me for it, not to him."

"If you are anxious to dance it, there's no lack of partners" — and her tone stung him with its indifferent coldness. "Plenty are waiting for you: Miss Lake, Miss Vaughan, Miss Darlington — look at them. Pray choose one."

She moved away in her haughty pride; a looker-on might have said in her calm indifference. But every pulse in her body was throbbing with pain, every fibre of her heart was sick with love — love for Frederick Grey.

His face was ablaze with anger, and he stood still for a moment, possibly undecided whether to make a scene and pull the little viscount's nose, or to let it alone. Then he went straight up to Helen Vaughan and asked her for the quadrille. They took their places in it, vis-à-vis to the viscount and Lucy.

Lady Grey was seated between the Countess of Oakburn and Mrs. Delcie. The latter, an inveterate busy-body, one of those wretched people who can never let anybody else be at peace, her eyes sharp as a needle, her brain active as a mischief-maker's tongue, watched Frederick Grey and Helen Vaughan for some minutes, and then turned to Lady Grey with a whisper:

"Is it a settled thing?" she asked.

"Is what a settled thing?"

"That your son marries Helen Vaughan?"

It was the first time the idea had been presented to Lady Grey. Living much in seclusion, she had seen and known nothing of the doings of the outer world of Seaford. Her heart leaped up with a bound of dismay, for she did not like Helen Vaughan.

"Pray do not mention anything so improbable," she faintly said. "My son marry Helen Vaughan! Indeed I hope not!"

"Improbable you call it?" was Mrs. Delcie's answer. "Look at them."

Lady Grey did look. The Lancers were over, and he was taking Helen Vaughan back to her place. He was bending down to talk to her, and there was an *empressement* in his manner that she, the mother, did not like. The evening's pleasure had gone out for her.

Back came Lucy, escorted by the viscount; she sat down by Lady Oakburn. The seat next her was vacant now, and Frederick Grey dropped into it. My Lady Lucy's cheeks grew pale with inward agitation.

"Lucy, what have I done to you?"

"Done?" repeated Lucy, in a tone of supreme indifference mingled with a dash of surprise. "Nothing."

He bit his lip. "Will you tell me how I have offended you?"

"You have not offended me."

"Then what is the matter with you?"

"What should be the matter with me? Really I do not understand you."

Neither in real truth did he understand Lucy. Frederick Grey was not a vain man, and it *never* occurred to him to think that she could be jealous. *He* thought nothing of that foolish dalliance — flirtation — call it what you will — in which his hours were often spent; the society of those pretty girls was pleasant pastime, but to him nothing more. If Miss Vaughan threw herself rather more in his way than the rest did, he never gave it a second thought; and most certainly he did not cast a suspicion that it was changing the manners of Lucy Chesney. In the days that had elapsed since her arrival at Seaford, he had been at times greatly pained by her behaviour to him. He had set it down hitherto to some unaccountable caprice: now he began to think that her feelings to him were changing. And he had felt so sure of her love!

"Lucy, you must know that you are behaving very strangely to me. You heard me ask you for the Lancers, and you turned and engaged yourself to that little puppy, who is not worth a kick. Will you stand up with me the next?"

"Thank you: I do not intend to dance the next. I feel a little tired."

He paused a minute, rose from his seat, and stood before her. "There must be some reason for all this."

"Reason for all what?"

"For your indifference to me."

"You may think so if you please."

"It looks very like caprice, Lucy."

"Caprice? Oh yes, that is it. It is caprice."

"Once for all," he rejoined, quite savagely, "will you dance the next dance with me, Lady Lucy?"

"No, I will not. Thank you all the same."

He turned on his heel. Lucy caught her little brother, who was running up to them.

"I am going home, Lucy," said the child. "Pompey's come, and I am going without being naughty, because I promised I would."

"There's my darling Frank," said Lucy, bending over him. "Wish mamma good night."

He was a brave, honourable little fellow, and he intended to go off blithely with Pompey, whose black face was seen at the door. The Oakburns were noted for holding a promise sacred; and it seemed that the future chief would be no degenerate descendant. Kissing his mamma, he put up his face to Lady Grey; but that lady was too much engaged to pay attention to him, and the boy ran away without it.

Lady Grey had her face turned to her son. She had pulled him to her when he was quitting Lucy. Mrs. Delcie had left her seat then, and Frederick halted before it, listening to his mother's whisper.

"Frederick! only a word — to ease my troubled heart. Surely you are not — you are not falling in love with Helen Vaughan!"

"I don't think I am, mother."

The answer was given gaily, lightly. All conscious of that other love so deeply seated in his heart, he could afford to joke at this. But he caught the anxious look of pain in his mother's eyes.

"You would not like her for a daughter-in-law?" he breathed, laughing still.

"I confess I should not."

"Very well. Be at ease, mother mine. What put such a thing into your head?"

"They say she is in love with you — that you love her. They are saying she is your chosen wife."

"I am much obliged to them, I'm sure. Who are 'they'?"

"Oh — the room of course," replied Lady Grey. "The people stopping at Seaford. Frederick —"

"Mr. Grey, do waltz with me, if you are not engaged."

The interruption came from Miss Fanny Darlington. She was quite young, and therefore deemed herself justified in acting as a child or a romp. He was not engaged, he said, and laughed as he took her on his arm.

"When is the wedding to be?" she asked, as he whirled her to the strains of Strauss's music.

"What wedding?"

"As if you did not know! It can mean nothing else, when your attentions are so marked. Mrs. Delcie says she knows for a fact the general has consented."

"When did she say that?"

"This evening. She was talking to me and Lady Lucy Chesney."

A change came over his features. Was *this* the secret of Lucy's inexplicable conduct to him — some wretched gossip linking his name with General Vaughan's daughter? All his gaiety seemed to have gone from him, and his tone, as he spoke to Fanny Darlington, was changed into one of grave earnestness.

"Miss Darlington, will you allow me to remind you — as I most certainly shall Mrs. Delcie — that to

speak of Miss Vaughan in this way, or of any other young lady, is unjustifiable. I am certain it would seriously displease her — and it has displeased me.”

He went through the rest of the waltz in silence. Miss Darlington grew cross, and asked what had come over him. At its conclusion he looked for Lucy and could not see her.

Lucy Chesney had gone out from the garish rooms: they accorded ill with her aching heart. In a corner of the terrace, shaded from observation by the clustering trees, she stood, leaning over the rails and gazing on the sloping gardens beneath, lying so cold and still in the light summer's night. Cold and still was her own face; cold and still her unhappy heart: its pulses felt as if frozen into stone; its life-blood to have left it. The waltz was over; she could hear that; and she pictured him with her happy rival, whispering his sweet vows in her ear. She stood there in her bitter misery, believing that he, whom she so passionately loved, had deserted her for another! The sound of laughter, of merriment, came from the rooms; the rich strains of the music were again floating on the air; the fragrant flowers, giving forth their strong night perfume, rose at her feet: all pleasant things in themselves, but they grated inharmoniously on Lucy's heart.

What had become of the old bliss that had made her days seem like a dream of Eden? It was gone. All had changed since their sojourn at Seaford; the joy had left her, the sweet half-consciousness of being beloved had departed, to give place to the bitterest jealousy.

Why did Helen Vaughan so seek him? Why do

girls thus beset attractive men? — ay, and men who are not attractive? Perhaps she hoped she should gain him; perhaps she but thought to while away her idle hours. However it might have been, it brought to Lucy Chesney fruits that seemed like bitter ashes. But she had to digest them; and never, never had they been harsher or more cruel than at that moment, as she hung over the terrace in the moonlight.

Her hands were clasped together in pain, and her forehead was pressed upon the cold iron of the rails, as if its chill could soothe the throbbing fire within. A cloud of images was in her brain, all bearing the beautiful but dreaded form of Helen Vaughan, and — some one touched her shoulder, and Lucy shivered and looked up.

It was Frederick Grey. What had he come out there for? *He* to see her in her abandonment of grief!

"Lucy!" he whispered, and the tone of his voice spoke of love if ever tone spoke it. "Lucy, are you ill?"

She would have been glad to fling his hand away, to fly from him, to meet his words with scorn; but she could not: for the heart will be true to itself, and the startled agitation unnerved her. She shook like a leaf.

He gently wound his arms round her, he bent over her and poured forth his tale of love — to be suppressed no longer: he told her how passionately he had hoped to make her his; that if he had been silent, it was because he feared the time to speak had not come. Lucy, in the revulsion of feeling, burst into tears, and yielded herself up to the moment's fascination.

"Oh, Lucy, how could you suffer this cloud to come between us?" he whispered. "How could you suspect me of faithlessness? My darling, let me speak plainly. We have loved each other, and we both knew it, though it may be that you scarcely acknowledged the fact to yourself; but here, without witnesses, — save One, who knows how ardently and loyally I will cherish you, under Him — surely we may lift the veil from our dearest feelings! Lucy, I say, we have loved each other."

She did not answer, but she did not lift her face from its sheltering place on his breast. The moment of rapture, shadowed forth in her dreams, had come!

"I was not conscious until to-night, ten minutes ago, that my name had been made free with, as it appears it has been, in connection with Helen Vaughan's. Lucy," he resumed, "I swear to you that I have not willingly given cause for it; I swear to you that I have had no love for her, or thought of love. I certainly have been brought much into contact with her, for you have estranged yourself from me since you came, and the idle hours of this place have hung upon my hands; but I cast my thoughts back and ask how far it has been my fault, and I believe I can truly say" — he paused with a quaint smile — "that I have been more sinned against than sinning. Lucy, when I have been walking by her side, my heart has wished that it was you: in conversing with her, I longed for your voice to answer me. Will you forgive me?"

Forgive him? ay. Her heart answered, if words failed. He bent his face to hers in the hushed night: —

"Believe me, Lucy, I love you as few men can love; I picture to myself the future, when you shall be mine; my cherished wife, the guiding-star of my home; my whole hopes, my love, my wishes are centered in you. You will not reject me? My darling, you will not reject me!"

How little likely she was to reject him, he contrived to gather. And the twinkling stars shone down on vows, than which none sweeter or purer had ever been registered.

"Lucy, you will waltz with me now?"

She dried her happy tears; and, as she returned to the room to take her place with him in the dance, she laughed aloud. The contrast between that time and this was so great! Miss Helen Vaughan and the little viscount whirled past them, and Frederick darted a saucy glance into Lucy's eyes. It made hers fall on her blushing cheeks.

Lady Jane Chesney had arrived when they reached home. After Lucy had retired for the night, Lady Oakburn opened her mind to Jane; she could not rest until she had told her all — how that Frederick and Lucy were in love with each other. Jane at first looked very grave: the Chesney pride was rising.

"I could not help it," bewailed the countess in her contrition. "I declare to you, Lady Jane, often as Frederick Grey came to us in Portland Place, that I never for a moment thought or suspected love was arising between him and Lucy. Our great intimacy with the Greys, and Sir Stephen's attendance as a medical man, must have blinded me. I would give the world — should this be displeasing to you — to recall the past."

"Nay, do not blame yourself," said Jane, kindly. "It is very probable that I should have seen no further than you. Frederick Grey! It is not the match altogether that Lucy should make."

"In some respects it is not."

Jane remained silent, communing with herself, her custom when troubled or perplexed. Presently she looked at Lady Oakburn. "Tell me what your opinion is. What do you think of it?"

"May I tell it freely?"

"Indeed I wish you would," was Jane's answer. "You have Lucy's welfare at heart as much as I have."

"Her welfare and her happiness," emphatically pronounced Lady Oakburn. "And the latter I do fear is now bound up in this young man. In regard to him, as a suitor for her, there are advantages and disadvantages. In himself he is all that can be desired, and his prospects are very fair; Sir Stephen must be a rich man, and there's the baronetcy. On the other hand, there's his profession, and his birth is wholly inferior; and — forgive me for saying it, Lady Jane — the Chesneys are a proud race."

"Tell me what your own decision would be, were it left to you," repeated Jane.

"I should let her have him."

Jane paused. "I will sleep upon this, Lady Oakburn, and talk with you further in the morning."

And when the morning came, Jane, like a sensible woman, had arrived at a similar decision. The first to run up and greet her as she quitted her chamber, was the little lord. Jane took him upon her knee in the breakfast-room, and turned his face upwards.

"He does not look ill, Lady Oakburn."

"I have no real fears for him," replied the countess. "In a few years I hope he will have acquired strength. Frank, tell sister Jane what Sir Stephen says."

"Sir Stephen says that mamma and Lucy are too fidgety over me; that if I were a poor little country boy, sent out in the corn-fields all day to keep the crows off, with only brown bread and milk for food, I should be all right," cried Frank, looking up to his sister.

Jane smiled, and thought it very probable Sir Stephen was in reason.

"Do you know, sister Jane, what I mean to be when I grow up a big man?" he continued. "I mean to be a sailor."

Jane faintly smiled and shook her head.

"Yes, I do. Mamma says that, if I were the poor little country boy, I might be one; but, as I am the Earl of Oakburn, I shall have other duties. But I want to be a sailor. Oh Jane, I do wish I could be a sailor! When I see the ships here, I long to run through the waves and get to them."

"It is surprising what a taste he has for the sea," murmured the countess to Jane; "he must have inherited it." And poor Jane sighed with sad reminiscences.

Lucy came in. Jane took her hand, and smiled as she gazed at the bright and blushing face.

"And so, Lucy, you have contrived to fall in love without leave or licence!"

Lucy coloured to the roots of her hair, to the very nape of her delicate neck; her eyelids were cast down,

and her fingers trembled in the hand of Lady Jane. All signs of true love, and Jane knew them to be so. The Countess of Oakburn approached Jane.

"I know you have felt the separation from Lucy," she said, with emotion. "Had the terms of the will been such that I could have departed from them, Lucy should have been yours. I could not help myself, Lady Jane; but I have tried to make her all you could wish."

"All any one could wish," generously returned Jane, as she took Lady Oakburn's hand. "You have nobly done your part by her. Do it by the boy, Lady Oakburn, and make him worthy of his father. I know you will."

"Being helped to do so by a better Help than mine," murmured the countess, as her eyes filled with tears.

And when Mr. Frederick Grey arrived that day and spoke out — as he did do — he was told that Lucy should be his.

CHAPTER XI.

A Tale from Mrs. Pepperfly.

THE afternoon's sun was shining on South Wen-nock: shining especially hard and full upon a small cottage standing by itself down Blister Lane. More especially did it appear to be shining upon a stout lady who was seated on a chair, placed midway in the narrow path leading from the little entrance gate to the cottage door. Her dress was light, what could be seen of it for snuff, — and so broad was she, taking up the width of the path and a great deal more, that

she looked like a great tower, planted there to guard the approach of the cottage against assaulters.

Judith came down the lane. Three or four weeks had passed since the events recorded in the last chapter, and Lady Jane was back at South Wennock again. Jane had some poor pensioners in some of the smaller cottages lower down this lane, and the servant's errand in it this afternoon was connected with them. Judith's eyes fell upon the lady, airing herself in the sun.

"What, is it you, Mother Pepperfly! Why, I have not seen you for an age. Well, you don't get thinner."

"I gets dreadful," said Mrs. Pepperfly. "They might take me about in a carivan, and show me off to the public as the fat woman from South Wennock. Particularly if they could invent a decent way of exhibiting of the legs. Mine's a sight, Judith."

Mrs. Pepperfly gingerly lifted her petticoats a little, and Judith saw that the ankles were indeed a sight. "I wonder you don't take exercise," she said.

"Me take exercise!" uttered Mrs. Pepperfly, resentfully; "what's the good of your talking to a woman of my size about exercise? It a'most kills me to get about when I changes my places. It's my perfession as have brought me to it, Judith; always a sitting by a bedside, or dandling a babby upon my knees; I haven't been able to get exercise, and, in course, now I'm too fat to do it. But I must be thankful it's no worse, for I retains my appetite, and can eat a famous good meal every time it's set afore me."

"I should eat less and leave off beer," said Judith. "Beer's very fattening."

The tears rushed into Mrs. Pepperfly's eyes at the

cruel suggestion. "Beer's the very prop and stay of my life," cried she. "Nobody but a barbarian would tell a poor woman that has to sit up often o' nights, tending upon others, to leave off her beer. I never shall leave off my beer, Judith, till it leaves off me."

Judith thought that likely, and did not contest the point.

"I suppose you are nursing somebody up here," she remarked. "Who lives in the cottage? The last time I came by, it wasn't let."

"I ain't a nursing nobody," returned Mrs. Pepperfly. "I'm up here on a visit. I left my place yesterday, and I expects to be fetched to another in a day or two, and I was invited here to spend the time atween."

"Who's the cottage let to?" continued Judith, dropping her voice.

"It's a widder. She ain't at home; she took the opportunity of my being here to get in a store of things she wanted, so she's gone about it. We haven't got nobody to overhear us that you should set on to whisper. I say, wasn't it a curious thing," added Mrs. Pepperfly, dropping her own voice to a whisper in opposition to what she had just said to Judith; "she came here, it's my firm belief, just to find out the rights and the wrongs about the death of that poor young lady."

"What young lady?"

"Why, that poor creature that the poisoned draught was gave to. She ——"

"Who is she? Where does she come from?" interrupted Judith, aroused to interest.

"I'll just tell ye about it," said Mrs. Pepperfly; "but if you go to ask me who she is, and what she

is, and where she comes from, I can't tell; for I don't know any more nor the babby that has not yet got its life's breath into it. My missis that I nursed last didn't get strong as soon as she ought, so it was settled she should go over to Great Wennock and stop with her relatives, and I went to take her there; it were Mrs. Tupper, the butcher's wife, and the babby died a week old, which I daresay you heered on. We went over on a Tuesday in the omnibus, nigh upon a month now, and it's the first time I'd been in the new omnibus or along the new road; for I'm no traveller, as is well known, which it's beautiful and smooth they both is, and gives no jolts. I took my missis on to her mother's, carrying her parcel of clothes for her, and I had a good dinner with 'em — a lovely shoulder o' mutton and onion sauce, and was helped three times to beer. After that, I goes back to the station, which it's not three minutes' walk, and sits myself in the omnibus agen it started to come home; it were waiting, you see, for the London train. Well, it came in, the train, and there got into the omnibus a widder and a little boy and some luggage, and that was all. She begun a talking to me, asking if I knowed any lady living about here o' the name of Crane. 'No, mum,' says I, 'I never knowed but one lady o' that name, and I didn't know much of her, for it's eight year ago, and she died promiscuous.' 'How do you mean?' says she, a snapping of me up short, as if she'd lost her breath. Well, Judith, one word led to another, and I told her about the lady's death in Palace Street, she a listening to me all the time as if her eyes were coming out of her head with wonder. I never see a body so eager."

"Who is she?" asked Judith.

"I tell ye I don't know. I'm sure o' one thing, though — that she knowed that poor lady, and is come to the place to ferret out what she can about the death."

"How is it that she is living in this cottage?" returned Judith, completely absorbed in the tale.

"I'm coming to it, if you'll let me," answered Mrs. Pepperfly. "I never see a body interrupt as you do, Judith. We talked on, the widder and me, till we come to South Wennock, and got out at the Red Lion. With that she looks about her, like a person in a quandary, up the street and down the street, and then she stretches out her hand and points. 'That's the way to the house where the lady was lying,' says she; 'And you're right, mum,' says I, 'for it just is.' 'I wonder whether them same lodgings is to let?' says she; 'if so, they'd suit me.' So upon that I telled her, Judith, what everybody knows, that the lodgings was *not* to let, through the widder Gould keeping of the parlours for herself now, having had a income left her, and the new curate occupying of her drawing-room. Well, then she asked me did I know of a cottage to let, where there was plenty of fresh air about it, her child being poorly, and I cast it over in my mind and thought of this — which it belongs you know to Tupper hisself, and them be his fields at the back where he keeps his beastesses."

"And she took it?"

"She looked at it that same afternoon, and she went straight off to Tupper and took it of him, paying three pound ten down for the first quarter's rent, for she said she'd not bother him with no references, and then she asked me where she could buy or hire a bit

of second-hand furniture, and I took her off to Knagg the broker's, and she got what she wanted. She invited me to stop with her, but I couldn't, for I had agreed to be at Tupper's and look after the children while his wife was away, and the widder said, then come up to her as soon as I was at liberty. Which I was a day ago, through Tupper's wife returning home hearty, and I come up here, and she has asked me to stop till I'm called out again, which it'll be in a day or two I expect, and happens to be Knagg's wife — and I thought it uncommon genteel and perlite of her, Judy; and so here I am, a enjoying of myself in the country air."

"And in the sun also," said Judith. "You'll get your face browner than it is."

"Tain't often I gets the chance of sitting in it out o' doors, so I thought I'd take advantage of it when I could, and I don't care whether I'm brown or white."

"But why do you think the person has come to find out about the young lady?"

"Look here," cried Mother Pepperfly, "I can see as far through a millstone as most folks, and I argue why should she invite me here, a stranger (though it were perlite to do it), unless she wanted to get something out of me? Not a blessed minute, Judy, have I been in the cottage, and I got here at two o'clock yesterday, but she has been a questioning of me about it: now it's the draught, and now it's the doctors, and now it's the nurse, and now it's the inquest, till I declare I'm a'most moithered. She wants to know where she can get a old newspaper with the history of it in, but I can't tell who keeps 'em unless Mrs. Fitch at

the Lion do. 'You won't say nothing to nobody, as I've asked you these questions about Mrs. Crane, I've a reason not,' says she to me last night. 'Mum, you may put your faith in me as I won't,' says I."

"And you have gone and told me to-day!" retorted Judith.

"But you are safe, you are, Judy, and won't repeat it, I know. You were one of us with her, too. I thought to myself this morning, 'Now, if I could see Judy Ford, I'd tell her this;' but I wouldn't open my lips to nobody else: and shan't, as the widder has asked me not. That other widder, Gould, I wouldn't furnish with a hint of it, if it was to save my life; she's such a magpie, it would be over the town the next hour if she got hold of it."

"Does she mean to live here all alone?" returned Judith.

"I suppose so. She has a woman in to clean, and puts out her washing, The child's a sickly little fellow; I don't think he'll make old bones. Come and see him."

Mrs. Pepperfly rose and sailed in-doors; Judith followed. Upon a rude sort of bed on the parlour floor, which opened from the kitchen, and *that* opened from the garden, after the manner of cottages, lay a boy asleep; a fair, quiet-looking child, with light flaxen hair falling over his features. Judith looked at him, and looked again; she was struck with his likeness to somebody, but could not for the life of her recollect to whom.

"He has got a white swelling in his knee," said Mrs. Pepperfly. "Leastways, I'm sure it's coming into one."

"A white swelling in his knee? Poor little fellow! that's dangerous."

"Kills youngsters nineteen times out of twenty," returned the nurse with professional equanimity.

"How thin and white he is," exclaimed Judith. "How his forehead's drawn! Whenever you see that lined forehead in a child, you may be sure it comes from long-endured pain."

"His mother says he has never been strong. Take a wee drop short, Judy?" continued Mrs. Pepperfly insinuatingly, as she produced a small bottle from some unseen receptacle beneath her capacious petticoats.

"Not I," answered Judith. "I'd rather pour it down the garden than down my throat: and I must be off, or I don't know what time I shall get back, and my lady will say I have been gossiping."

Judith proceeded on her way, and executed her commission with Lady Jane's pensioners. As she returned, she saw a stranger seated in the chair Mrs. Pepperfly had occupied, but which was now drawn close to the cottage in the shade; a respectable-looking widow woman of fifty years. The child lay in her arms still asleep, and Mrs. Pepperfly had disappeared. Could Judith's eyes have penetrated inside the cottage, she would have seen her comfortably stretched out on an arm-chair, overcome either by the sun or the bottle, and fast asleep as a church.

Judith scanned the hard features of the stranger, and remembered them, having probably been assisted thereunto by the conversation with the nurse. An impulse prompted her to enter the gate and speak.

"Good afternoon. I think I have seen you before."

The stranger scanned her in turn, but did not recognise her.

"May be," she quietly replied. "I don't remember you."

"I was the young woman who was so much with that poor lady, Mrs. Crane, during the few days she lay ill."

Intelligence, glad intelligence, flashed into the stranger's face. "I am glad to see you," she exclaimed. "I wonder you remembered me."

"You are Mrs. Smith, who came down and took away the baby?"

"Yes, I am. But now I'd rather it wasn't spoken of, if you'd oblige me. If it got about, I should have the whole parish up here, wanting to know what I can't tell them: and I have another reason besides. Mrs. What's-her-name, the fat nurse, says nothing has been heard as to who the young lady was, and people would be asking me. I could not answer them; I don't know anything to tell; so I'd rather not be questioned."

"Where's the baby?" inquired Judith, believing as little of the last words as she chose.

"Dead."

"It is indeed! Well, 'twas but a little mite. I thought perhaps this was it."

"This is mine," said Mrs. Smith. "And a great sufferer he is, poor thing. He has always been weakly."

"He seems to sleep well," observed Judith.

"That's because he gets no sleep at night. Every afternoon he's dead asleep, so I put him down a mattress in the kitchen or parlour, or wherever I may happen to be, for he don't like to go away from me."

Why, if that child had lived, he would have been getting on for nine years old. This, you may see, isn't seven."

"I can't think who he's like," remarked Judith, again looking attentively at the child. "He is the very model of somebody, some face that's familiar to me; but I can't call to mind whose."

"I know nobody he's like when he's asleep," said Mrs. Smith, also regarding the boy. "Asleep and awake, it is not the same face — not a bit; I have often noticed that; it must be the eyes and the expression that make the difference."

"Has he light eyes?" inquired Judith.

"No; dark. But now, do just tell me what you can about that horrible death. Was it a mistake, or was it wilful?"

"That's what people are unable to decide," said Judith.

"That old nurse is not very explicit; she speaks of one doctor and speaks of another, mixing the two up together. I want to know who really was attending her."

"Mr. Stephen Grey had been attending her — he is Sir Stephen Grey now; and Mr. Carlton had seen her once or twice; the night of her death, and the night before it."

"Was she ill enough to have two doctors?"

"Not at all. Mr. Carlton was to have attended her, but when she was taken ill he was away from South Wennock, so the other came for him. Mr. Carlton was to have taken her the next day."

"Were they both married men?"

"Mr. Grey was; had been a long while; and Mr.

Carlton married directly after. He married a peer's daughter. But I can't stay to talk now."

"Oh, do stay! I want you to tell me all that passed; you'll do it clearer than that woman. Step in, and take a cup of tea with us."

"You might as well ask me to stay for good," returned Judith. "My lady will wonder, as it is, what is keeping me. I'll get an hour's leave, and come up another time."

"Just one word before you go, then; I hear of Messrs. Grey and Lycett, and I hear of Mr. Carlton; which would be the most skilful to call in, in case my child gets worse? I am a stranger here, and don't know their characters."

"I believe they are all clever; all skilful men. I like Mr. Grey best; I am most used to him."

"It doesn't matter much, then, as far as skill goes, which I call in?"

"As far as skill goes, no," replied Judith. And said good afternoon, and left.

She went home, pondering on the likeness she had traced in the boy's face; she could not recollect who it was he resembled. Her suspicions had been aroused that it might be the same child, in spite of the apparent difference in the age; but, even allowing that Mrs. Smith had deceived her in saying it was not, and Judith did not see why she should, the fact would not have helped her, since it was certainly not the deceased lady's face that the child's struck her as being like.

But all in a moment, as Judith was turning in at the gate of Cedar Lodge, a face flashed on her mind's remembrance, and she saw whose it was that the boy's resembled. The fact seemed to stagger her; for she

started aside amidst the trees as one who has received a blow. And when she at length went in-doors, it was with a perplexed gaze and knitted brow.

CHAPTER XII.

Mr. Carlton's Dreams.

THERE was a sound of revelry in the Red Lion inn. A dinner of the townspeople was taking place there to celebrate some cause of national rejoicing. Filling the chair — as the newspapers had it the next day — was Lewis Carlton, Esquire; a great man now amidst his fellow townsmen. People are taken with show; people are taken with grandeur; and Mr. Carlton displayed both. He was successful as a medical man, he was rather liked as a social one; and his wife's rank brought him always a certain consideration. The money he had inherited from his father, together with the proceeds of his own practice, enabled him to live in a style attempted by few in South Wennock. The town talked indeed of undue extravagance; whispers went round of consequent debt: but that was the affair of Mr. Carlton and Lady Laura alone, and was nothing to anybody. Certainly there was a wide contrast between the quiet style of living of John Grey and his partner Mr. Lycett, and the costly one of Mr. Carlton. The partners were prudent men, putting by for their children: Mr. Carlton was not a prudent man as regarded pecuniary matters, and he had no children to put by for. Carriages and horses and servants and entertainments made his house somewhat unlike a medical man's. But the public, I say,

are led away by all this, and Mr. Carlton was just now the most popular resident in all South Wennock.

He had been selected by unanimous accord to take the chair at this very meeting, and had consented. Consented contrary to his usual line of conduct; for Mr. Carlton personally was of a retiring disposition, and wholly declined to be made much of, or to be brought prominently out. It was the first time he had yielded a consent to fill any public office whatever. He never would serve as poor-law guardian, or churchwarden, or parish overseer; coroner's mandates could not draw him on a jury; the stewardship at races, at public balls, had alike been thrust upon him, or was sought to be, all in vain. Mr. Carlton, in spite of the show and pomp of his home (and that show perhaps was owing to his wife, more than to him), was a retiring man, and would not be drawn out.

He could hardly have told why he had yielded now, and consented in this instance to take the chair at the dinner. Having done so, however, he did not shrink from its duties, and he was proving that incapacity was certainly not the cause of his repeated refusals, for never a better chairman graced a table.

He sat at the head of the board, making his after-dinner speeches, giving out his toasts. His manner was genial, his whole heart seemed to be in his task, his usually impassive face was lighted up to gaiety. A good-looking man thus, with his well-formed features, his gentlemanly form. Some of the county people were at the table, nearly all the townsmen of note; one and all applauded him to the skies; and when the chairman's health was proposed, and shouts rent the air, they were taken up by the mob flattening its

noses against the curtained windows outside: "The health of Mr. Carlton! Health and happiness to Mr. Carlton!"

The clock was striking eleven, when the chairman, flushed and heated, came forth. Perhaps none of those gentlemen had ever seen him flushed in their lives before; he was always to them a coldly impassive man, whom nothing could excite. It was not the wine that had done it now: Mr. Carlton, invariably abstemious in that respect, had taken as little as it was possible to take; but the unusual ovation paid to him had warmed his heart and flushed his brow. Several of the guests came out with him, but the greater portion were remaining longer; some of these had to ride home miles, the rest were hastening to their proximate homes. For the most part they were slightly elated, for it had been a very convivial meeting; and they took a demonstrative leave of Mr. Carlton, nearly shaking his hands off, and vowing he was a rare good fellow and must be their chairman always. The crowd of eaves-droppers — ever swayed by the popular feeling of the hour, ever excitable — wound up with a cheer for Mr. Carlton by way of chorus.

He walked along the street towards his home, the cheer echoing in his ears. Such moments had not been frequent in Mr. Carlton's life, and he was a little lifted out of his ordinary self. It was a warm night in that genial season hovering between summer and autumn, and Mr. Carlton raised his hat and bared his brow to the cool night air, as he glanced at the starry canopy of heaven. Whatever cares he might have had, whatever sources of trouble or anxiety — and whether he had any or not was best known to him-

self; but few of us are without some secret skeleton that we have to keep sacred from the world, however innocent in itself it may be — were all cast to the winds. Mr. Carlton forgot the past and the present in the future; and certain vague aspirings lying at the bottom of his heart were allowed to take a more tangible form than they had ever taken before. When the spirit is excited it imbues things with its own hues: they are apt to be very brilliant ones.

“I seem like a god to them,” he laughed, alluding to the extravagant homage recently paid him by the townsfolk. “Jove on Olympus never had a warmer ovation. I have become what I never intended — a man of note in the place. Any foolish charge against me — psha! they’d buffet the fellow bringing it. Nevertheless, I shall leave you to your sorrow, my good natives of South Wennock; and I know not why I have stopped with you so long. For how many years have I said to myself at waking, morning after morning, that another month should see me take my farewell of the place! and here I am still. Is it that some invisible chain binds me to it — a chain that I cannot break? Why else *do* I stop? Or is it that some latent voice of caution — tush! I don’t care for those thoughts to-night.”

He broke off, rubbed his brow with his cambric handkerchief, nodded a salutation in response to one given him by a passer-by, and resumed his musings.

“My talents were not made to be hid under a bushel — and what else is it; a general practitioner in a paltry country town! I came here but as a stepping-stone, never intending to remain; and but for circumstances, to which we are all obliged to be slaves,

I should not have remained. I think I have been a fool to stop so long, but I'll leave it now. London is the field for me, and I shall go to it and take my degree. My reputation will follow me; I shall make use of these county aristocrats to recommend me; I shall try for her Majesty's knightly sword upon my shoulder — 'Rise up, Sir Lewis.' I may be enrolled, in time, amidst the baronetage of the United Kingdom, and then my lady cannot carp at inequality of rank. A proud set, the Chesneys, and my wife the proudest. Yes, I will remove to London, and I may get on to the very highest rank permitted to men of physic. *May* get on! I *will* get on; for Lewis Carlton to will a thing is to do it. Look at Stephen Grey! was there ever such luck in this world? And if he could go triumphantly on, as he has done, without influential friends to back him, what may I not look to do? I am not sorry that luck has attended Stephen: nay, I am glad that it should be so. I have no enmity to him; I'd speed him on, myself, if I could. I wish him right well anywhere but in South Wennock — and that he'll never come back to. But I hate his son. I should like to wring his neck. So long, however, as the insolent jackanapes behaves himself and does not cross my path — why, who are you?"

The last question was addressed to a female, and an exceedingly broad female, who stood in the shade of Mr. Carlton's gate, dropping curtsies, just as he was about to turn into it.

"If it wasn't for the night, sir, you'd know me well enough," was the response. "Pepperfly, at your service, sir."

"Oh, Nurse Pepperfly," returned the surgeon,

blandly; for somehow he always was bland to Mrs. Pepperfly. "You should stand further forward, and let your good-looking face be seen."

"Well, now, you will have your joke, sir," remarked the nurse. "Says I to the folks wherever I goes, 'If you want a pleasant, safe, good-hearted gentleman, as can bring you through this vale of sicknesses, just you send for Dr. Carlton.' And I am only proud, sir, when I happens to be in conjunction with you, that's all; which is not the happy case to-night, though I'm here, sir, to ask you to pay a visit perprofessionally."

"Where to?" asked Mr. Carlton. "What case is it?"

"It's not a case of life and death, where you need run your legs off in a race again time," luminously proceeded Mrs. Pepperfly. "Whether you goes to-morrow morning, or whether you goes to-morrow a'ter-noon, it'll come to the same, sir, as may be agreeable."

"But where's it to?" repeated Mr. Carlton, for the lady had stopped.

"It's where I've been a-staying, sir, for the last few days; a private visit I've been on, and not per-fessional, and she's Mrs. Smith. I'm fetched out to-night, sir, to Mrs. Knagg, Knagg's wife the broker's, and Mrs. Smith says to me, 'Call in at Dr. Carlton's as you passes, and make my dooty to him, and say I've heered of his skill, and ask him to step in at his leisure to-morrow to prescribe for my child' — which a white swelling it is in its knee, sir, and t'other in the grave, as may be said, for 'twon't be long out of it; and me the last few days as I've been there, a worrying of her to let me come for Dr. Carlton."

There were sundry embellishments in the above speech, which, in strict regard to truth, might have been omitted. Mr. Carlton, a shrewd man, took them for as much as they were worth. The name Smith had suggested to him but one woman of that name as likely to have had the lady before him on a visit.

"Mrs. Smith's child got a white swelling!" he exclaimed, in surprise. "It must have come on pretty quick. Which of the children is it?"

"Which of the children, sir?" echoed Nurse Pepperfly; "she's got but one. Oh, I see; you be thinking of t'other Mrs. Smith, the cow-keeper's wife. It's not her, sir; it's Mrs. Smith up at Tupper's cottage in Blister Lane."

"I did not know there was a Mrs. Smith at Tupper's cottage," he replied.

"She have not been long in it, sir; she's come fresh to the place, and she have took a fancy to me, which is very sensible of her. She'd be glad if you'd go up some time to-morrow, sir."

"Very well," said Mr. Carlton. "I won't forget."

"It's good night to you, sir, then, and wishing you was a coming to Mrs. Knaggs's along with me; but it's Mr. Lycett. Which is a safe gentleman too, and nothing to be said against."

She sailed off towards the town, and Mr. Carlton closed his gate, and glanced up at his windows; in some of which lights were burning.

"I wonder whether I shall find Laura in tantrums to-night," he said, half audibly.

By which expression the reader must not think that Mr. Carlton was in the habit of visiting those "tantrums" unpleasantly on his wife. If not a strictly

faithful husband, he was always — when Laura allowed him to be so — an affectionate one. He loved her still as much as it was in the nature of such a man as Mr. Carlton, disenchanted by time and change of the first fond passion, to love. Had Laura but permitted him, he would have been ever tender to her; and that singular charm which distinguished his manner to all women, where he chose to put it forth, exercised its spell upon her still.

He opened the door with his latch-key, and a footman came forward into the hall and took his master's hat. A civil, simple-mannered rustic, in spite of his fine livery.

"Is Lady Laura in, Jonathan?"

"My lady has been in this half hour, sir."

Laura was lounging on a sofa in the drawing-room, half asleep. She had very few resources within herself: reading, working, albums, engravings, she was sure to yawn over all; music she had not much cared for of late. To spend a half hour alone at night, as she was doing now, was a very penance to Laura Carlton.

She rose up when her husband entered, and the mantle of lace, which she had worn in the carriage to return home, was still on her shoulders. It fell from them now; or rather she shook it off; and the rich silk dress she wore was displayed to view, and the gleaming jewels on her neck and arms shone in the gaslight. She had been to a dinner party; made up by a lady, whose husband had some motive for not wishing to attend the public dinner at the Lion.

"Well, Laura!" he said, pleasantly. "Home I see."

"Oh, Lewis, it was so stupid!" she exclaimed. "Only fancy it! — two gentlemen and ten ladies. I went to sleep in the carriage coming home, and I have been asleep here, I think. I am glad you are come."

He sat down on the sofa by her side. She held out her wrist, asking him to unclasp a certain bracelet, which was tight. Mr. Carlton put the bracelet on the table and kept the hand.

"I scarcely hoped," he said, "to find you back so soon."

"There was nothing to stay for. What could ten women do for themselves? I was so thankful when the carriage came. They made a fuss at my leaving, but I said my head ached. And so it did, with the stupidity. It's dreadfully dull in the country at this season of the year. Everybody's at the watering-places."

"A town like this is dull at most seasons," remarked Mr. Carlton. "At times I regret that I am tied to it."

Laura passed over the remark without notice, almost without hearing it. The fact of his being "tied" to it was so indisputable a one, that comment was unnecessary. "The Goughs are going to Scarborough next week," she said. "Heigho!"

The sigh was a weary one. Mr. Carlton turned to her.

"Laura, you know, if you would like to go to any of those places, you have but to say so. If it would do you good, or give you pleasure —"

"I don't think I care about it," she interrupted. "You would not go with me."

"How could I? I am tied here, I say. I wish my practice was a different one!"

"In what way?"

"A physician's — where patients, for the most part, had to come to me. The most wearing life of all is a general practitioner's; and it is the least profitable. Compare my gains here with those of a London physician."

"Leave it, and set up in London," said she.

"I am seriously thinking of doing so."

Laura had spoken carelessly, without meaning, and the words astonished her excessively. Mr. Carlton explained. His talents were buried in South Wennock, he said, and he was really purposing a change. "You would like London, I think Laura?"

"Yes, very much," she answered; her vain head filling itself forthwith with sundry gay visions, popularly supposed to be capable of realisation in the metropolis only. "But you would never quit South Wennock," she resumed, after a pause.

"Why would I not quit it?"

"You have found attractions in the place, if I have not."

A momentary contraction of the brow, smoothed away as instantly, and Mr. Carlton was himself again. Not perfectly conscience clear, he hated above all things these allusions of his wife's: he had thought the old trouble was dying away.

"Laura," he gravely said, "South Wennock has no attractions for me; but the contrary. Should I leave it, I take its only attraction with me — yourself."

She laughed. "It's all very well for you to tell me so."

"I swear it," he said, in an earnest, almost a solemn, tone, as he bent to her and laid his hand impressively on her shoulder. "I have no attraction like yourself; whether in South Wennock or in the wide world."

She believed him; she liked him still well enough to wish it. "But, Lewis, it has not always been so, you know."

"I thought my wife promised me, when we were last upon this topic, to let bygones be bygones?"

"Did I? Well, I believe I did; and I *will*. Tell me about your dinner, Lewis. Was it very successful? How did you get on with your speeches?"

He gave her a laughing account of it all, and of the homage paid him. For nearly an hour they remained up, in gay, amicable converse; and when Laura went to rest that night, a vision dawned upon her of a future time when full confidence might be restored between them.

On the following day, Mr. Carlton proceeded to keep the appointment at Mrs. Smith's. He called in about eleven o'clock, after visiting his patients on the Rise. He went straight into the cottage without knocking, and there happened to be nobody in the room but the child, who was seated in a little chair with some toys on his lap, soldiers, which he was placing in martial array.

"Are you the little fellow —"

So far spoke Mr. Carlton, and there he stopped dead. He had cast his eyes, wondering eyes just then, on the boy's face, and apparently was confounded, or staggered, or something, by what he saw. Did he trace any likeness, as Judith had done? Certain it

was, that he stared at the child in undisguised astonishment, and only seemed to recover self-possession when he saw they were not alone, for Mrs. Smith was peeping in from the staircase door.

"I thought I heard a strange voice," quoth she.

"Perhaps you are the doctor, who was to call?"

"I am," replied Mr. Carlton.

He eyed her as he spoke almost as keenly as he had done the child. The woman had remarked his earnest gaze at the boy, and feared it was caused by the little one's sickly look.

"He does look ill, I'm afraid," she said. "Is that what you were struck with, sir?"

"No — no," returned Mr. Carlton, half abstractedly; "he put me in mind of some one, that was all. What is his name?"

"Smith."

"Where does he come from?"

"Well," returned the woman, who had a blunt, abrupt way of speaking, the result of natural manner, not of intended incivility, "I don't see what that has to do with it, or what it is to anybody in this place, which is strange to me and me to it. But if it's necessary for you to know it, sir, he comes from Scotland, where he has lived all his life. He is my youngest child: the only one I have reared."

"Was he born in Scotland?" asked Mr. Carlton, his eyes still riveted on the child.

"Whether he was born there, or whether he was born in New Zealand don't matter to the present question," returned the woman, with a touch of irascibility, for she thought the surgeon had no right to pry into her affairs. "If you don't like to treat my boy, sir,

unless you first know the top and bottom of everything, there's no harm done, and I'll send for Mr. Grey."

Mr. Carlton laughed pleasantly at her irritability. He rejoined in a courteous tone.

"It guides us very much sometimes to know what sort of a climate our patients have been living in, and whether they were born in it; and our inquiries are not usually attributed to idle curiosity, Mrs. Smith. But, come, let me see his knee."

She undid the wrappings, and Mr. Carlton stooped down to examine the knee; but still he could not keep his eyes from the boy's face. And yet there was nothing out of common in the face; unless it was in the eyes. Thin, pale, quiet features, with flaxen hair waving over them, were illumined by a pair of large, rich, soft brown eyes, beautiful to look at.

"Do I pain you, my little man?" said Mr. Carlton, as he touched the knee.

"No, sir. This soldier won't stand," he added, holding one out to Mr. Carlton, with the freedom of childhood.

"Won't it? Let me see what's the matter. The foot wants cutting level. There," he continued, after shaving it with his penknife, "it will stand now."

The boy was enraptured; it had been a defaulting soldier, given to tumble over from the commencement; and the extraordinary delight that suddenly beamed forth from his eyes, sent a thrill through the senses of the surgeon. But for the woman overlooking him, he could have bent his searching gaze into those eyes for the next half hour, and never removed it.

"He seems a quiet little fellow."

"Indeed, then, he was a regular little tartar till this illness came on," was Mrs. Smith's reply. "A great deal too fond of showing that he had a will of his own. This has tamed his spirit down. Could you form any idea, sir, what can have brought it on? I'm certain that he never had a fall, or any other hurt. But he has never been strong."

"It is a disease that arises from weakness of constitution as well as from injury," replied Mr. Carlton. "Do you purpose residing permanently at South Wennock?"

"That's how far I may feel inclined, sir, and how it may agree with the child," she answered civilly. "I am not tied to any spot."

Mr. Carlton, after a few professional directions, took his departure. As he turned from the lane into the high road, so absorbed was he in thought, that he did not notice the swift passing of Mr. John Grey in his gig, until the latter called out to him. The groom pulled up, and Mr. Carlton advanced to the gig. There was not much private intimacy between the surgeons, but they often met professionally.

"Lycett is with Knagg's wife," began Mr. Grey, stooping from his gig to say what he had to say. "By what I hear, it appears not unlikely to be a difficult case; if so, he may want your assistance. Shall you be in the way?"

"Yes. Or if I go out, I'll leave word where I may be found."

"That's all right, then," returned Mr. Grey, signing to his groom to go on. "I am called in haste to a shocking accident, five miles away; some men burnt by an explosion of gunpowder. Good morning."

The gig sped on; and Mr. Carlton went towards South Wennock, nearly oblivious to all things save one; and that was the face of the little boy.

CHAPTER XIII.

A Perplexing Likeness.

THAT must have been a remarkable child, judging by its face, for the hold it seemed to take upon people and the consternation it caused was something amazing.

On the afternoon of the above day, it chanced that Lady Jane Chesney and her sister Laura were taking a quiet walk together, an unusual circumstance. Their course led down Blister Lane, for Jane wished to leave a book at the door of one of her pensioners; and in passing the gate of Tupper's cottage, they saw a little boy seated in the garden in a child's chair, some toys lying in his pinafore. His head had fallen back and his hands had dropped; he had sunk into a dose.

His face was full in their view; Lady Laura's glance fell upon it, and she halted.

"Good Heavens!" she uttered "what an extraordinary likeness!"

"Likeness," repeated Jane. "Likeness to whom? He looks very pale and sickly. I wonder who they are? Judith said the cottage was let."

"I never saw such a likeness in my life," resumed Lady Laura, quite devouring the face with her eyes. "Don't you see it, Jane?"

"I do not perceive a likeness to anyone. To whom do you allude?"

"Then if you don't see it, I will not tell you," was the answer: "but it is certainly plain enough."

They were about to walk on, when a voice was heard inside the cottage, "Lewis!"

"Listen," whispered Laura, pulling her sister back.

"Lewis! why, you've never gone and dropped off again. Now I won't have you do it, for you know that if you sleep so much in the day, you can't sleep at night. Come! wake up."

The speaker came forth from the door: a hard-featured woman in a widow's cap. She noted the ladies standing there.

"The little boy appears ill," remarked Lady Jane.

"He is very poorly, ma'am," was the answer. "He will go to sleep in the afternoon, and then there's good-bye to sleep for the night; and I want to break him of it."

"Invalids are generally drowsy in an afternoon, especially if their night's rest is broken. You are strangers, here, I think," added Lady Jane.

"Yes. I've brought him, hoping the country air will do him good. Come, Lewis, wake up," she said, tapping the boy on the arm. "Why there's all your soldiers running away!"

What with the talking, the tapping, and the soldiers, the boy was fully aroused. He sat up, and fixed his magnificent dark eyes upon the ladies.

"Oh, I see it now," murmured Lady Jane to her sister. "It is an extraordinary likeness; the very self-same eyes."

"Nay," returned Laura, in the same low tone, "the eyes are the only feature not like. His eyes were shut when the resemblance struck me."

"Look, look! the very expression she used to wear!" whispered Jane, so intent upon the boy as to have paid no attention to her sister's dissenting words.

"*She!*" uttered Laura, in an accent of wonder. "Why, what are your ideas running upon, Jane?"

"Upon Clarice. The boy's likeness to her is wonderful. Whose little boy is this?" quickly added Lady Jane, turning to the woman. "He is so very like a — a — a — friend of mine, a lady."

"He's mine," was the short retort.

Lady Jane gave a sigh of regret, as she always did when she spoke or thought of Clarice; but in the present sigh relief was mingled. She did not ask herself why, though innately conscious of it. "There is no accounting for resemblances," she remarked to the mother, as she bade her good afternoon, and bent her steps onward. Laura followed her: and she cast a haughty, condemning glance upon the woman at parting.

"Jane," began Laura, "I think you are demented. What do you mean by saying the child is like Clarice?"

"Why, you spoke first of the likeness yourself!"

"Not to Clarice. He is not in the least like her."

"Of whom, then, did you speak?" was the wondering question.

"I shan't say," unceremoniously answered Lady Laura. "Certainly not of Clarice; he is no more like her than he's like me."

"Laura, save that boy's and Clarice's, and perhaps Lucy's, but Lucy's are softer, I do not believe there are such eyes in the world, so large and brilliant and sweetly tender. Yours are the same in shape and colour, but not in expression. His likeness to what poor Clarice was is wonderful."

Laura paused, rather staggered at Jane's words.

"I'll go back and look again," said she. She wheeled round, retraced her steps, and stood at the

gate a minute talking to the boy, but not deigning to notice the woman. Jane stood by her side in silence, looking at him.

"Well?" said Jane, when they finally turned away.

"I repeat that I cannot trace any resemblance to Clarice. I do trace a great resemblance to some one else, but not in the eyes; and it is not so striking now he is awake, as it was when he was asleep.

"It is very strange!" cried Lady Jane.

"What is strange?"

"It is all strange. The likeness to Clarice is strange; your not seeing the likeness is strange; and your detecting one to somebody else is strange, as you say you do; and your declining to mention to whom, is strange. Is it to any of our family, Laura?"

"The Chesneys? Oh, no. Jane, you spoke just now of Clarice in the past tense. 'His likeness to what poor Clarice *was*'; it is as though you think she is no longer living."

"What else am I to think?" returned Jane. "All these years, and no trace of her. My father on his death-bed left the seeking of her out to me, but I have no clue to go upon, and can do nothing, and hear nothing."

"If you feel so sure of her death, you had better take the three thousand pounds to yourself," spoke Laura, with a touch of acerbity. Her having been disinherited was a sore point still.

"No," quietly returned Jane, "I shall never appropriate that money to myself. Until we shall be assured beyond doubt of Clarice's death — if she be dead — the money will remain out at interest, and then —"

"What then?" asked Laura, for her sister had stopped.

"We shall see when that time comes," was the somewhat evasive remark of Jane. "But for myself I shall touch none of it; I have plenty, as it is."

Now you need not be astonished, my good reader, at this discrepancy in the vision of the sisters. It is well known that where one person will detect a likeness, another cannot see it. "How greatly that child resembles her father!" will be heard from one; "Nay," speaks up another, "how much she resembles her mother!" And both are right. Some people detect the likeness of form, others that which exists in expression. Some will be struck with the wonderful resemblance to each other between the members of a family, even before knowing that they are related; others cannot see it or trace it — to their view there is no resemblance whatever. You must surely have remarked this in your own experience.

And thus it was with the ladies Chesney; the one could not see with the eyes of the other. But it was rather remarkable that both should have detected a resemblance in this strange child, and not to the same person.

Things, in regard to the sick woman, turned out as Mr. Grey had anticipated. In the afternoon a message came to Mr. Carlton from his brother practitioner, Mr. Lycett, and he hastened to the broker's house. There he found Mrs. Pepperfly in all her glory. To give that lady her due, apart from her graces of person and her proneness to a certain failing, she was a skilful, clever woman, equal to an emergency; and nothing brought out her talent like an emergency, and there was nothing

she was so fond of. "A spice of danger puts me on my metal, and shows folks the stuff I'm made of," was a favourite remark of hers; and Mrs. Pepperfly might thank her stars that it was so, or she would have been allowed to sink into private life long ago.

It was not so much that a second doctor's services were then actually required, as that it was expedient one should be at hand, in case they should be; consequently, while Mr. Lycett chiefly remained with the sick woman, Mr. Carlton had an opportunity for a little chat with Mrs. Pepperfly in an adjoining room. Which, however, was enjoyed by snatches, for Mrs. Pepperfly was in and out, from one chamber to another, like a dog in a fair.

"Have you been up there, to Tupper's cottage, sir?" she asked, between whiles.

"I went there this morning. Where do they come from?"

"And ain't it a bad case, sir?" returned Mrs. Pepperfly, unmindful of the question.

"I don't think it has been well treated," remarked Mr. Carlton. "Do you know where they come from or what brings them to South Wennock?"

"She comes from — where was it? — Scotland or Ireland, or some of them outlandish places, I think she said. What she wants in South Wennock is another matter," added Mrs. Pepperfly with a sniff.

The accent was peculiar, and Mr. Carlton looked at her.

"Have you any idea what does bring her here?" he repeated, his tone slightly authoritative.

"Well, yes, I does have my idea, sir, and I may be wrong and I may be right! Though it don't make

no difference to me whether I be or whether I bain't. And I don't suppose, you'd care, sir, to hear it, neither."

"Speak on," said Mr. Carlton, half eagerly, half carelessly. "What do you suppose her business is at South Wennock?"

Mrs. Pepperfly dropped her voice to a whisper. "You remember that young lady who came to her death so awful at the widder Gould's through Mr. Stephen Grey's draught — though indeed, sir, what with the heaps of patients you have had since, and the affair fading out of memory, as it were, you might have forgot her long ago!"

"What of her?" asked Mr. Carlton, and there was a sound in his voice as though he had lost his breath.

"Well, sir, my belief is just this — that that there widder up at Tupper's is appeared at South Wennock to ferret out what she can about the death, and nothing less."

Mr. Carlton did not reply, but he gazed at Mrs. Pepperfly as eagerly as he had gazed at the suffering boy, and with far more inward perplexity, though it did not show itself on his impassive face.

"How very absurd!" he uttered, after a while.

"Just what I says to myself," responded the woman. "And what good 'll it do her? If we could come at anything certain as to who the poor young lady was, and how the draught were converted into poison, 'twould be some satisfaction; but there ain't none to be gained, as it is. I telled the widder Smith so, with my own lips."

"You have talked to her, then, about it?"

"Talked to her!" ejaculated Nurse Pepperfly, "she haven't let my tongue have no holiday from talking of it, since we two met in the new omnibus."

"The new omnibus!" he repeated. "What do you mean?"

Mrs. Pepperfly liked few things better than talking, and she forthwith recounted to Mr. Carlton the history of her meeting with the widow, and the progress of the acquaintance since. Ere it was well concluded, her duties took her into the adjoining chamber.

Mr. Carlton had listened in silence, and now he stood, apparently revolving the news. He walked to the window, opened it, thrust his head out into a stifling back yard, where certainly little air could be found, if that was his motive, and after a while drew it back again.

"Have you mentioned this to any one?" he asked, as the woman re-appeared, and something sharp in his tone grated on her ear.

"Never to a blessed soul," protested Mother Pepperfly, conveniently oblivious to all recollection of Judith. "The widder charged me not, sir."

"And I would recommend you not to do so," returned Mr. Carlton. "I have not forgotten the worry and annoyance the affair caused, if you have. I was besieged with curiosity-mongers by night and by day until it had blown over. They left me no leisure to attend to my own business; and I should be exceedingly sorry to be subjected to a similar annoyance again — as I should be, were the affair raked up. So be silent, as Mrs. Smith tells you. What's *her* motive for wanting silence?" he abruptly added.

"She hasn't give none to me, sir; she hasn't said

as she's got a motive, or that she does want to find out anything. But when a person harps everlastingly upon one string, like a bell and a clapper, hammering to find out its top and its tail, one can't be off suspecting, sir, that there's a motive at the bottom."

"I wonder —— who she can be!" he said, in a musing tone, making a pause in the sentence, as marked.

"She's uncommon close about herself," was the answering observation of Mrs. Pepperfly.

Mr. Carlton said no more. Indeed there was not time for it, for he was called to by Mr. Lycett. An hour later he quitted Mrs. Knagg's, his business there being over.

He reached home, buried in a reverie. The name, Smith, the information now furnished by Nurse Pepperfly, drew him to the not unnatural conclusion that she might be the Mrs. Smith spoken of as having taken away Mrs. Crane's infant; the woman he had himself seen at Great Wennock railway station. If so, could this be the same child? He had asked the boy's age that morning, and Mrs. Smith replied "six;" and the boy did not in appearance look more than six. That other child, if alive, would be considerably older; but Mr. Carlton knew that the look of children as regards their age is deceptive.

He entered his surgery, spoke a word or two to his assistant, Mr. Jefferson, mixed up a small phial of medicine with his own hands, and went out again, glancing at his watch. It was past six then, but their dinner hour was seven.

Near to his own house was a toy-shop, and as Mr. Carlton passed it he saw displayed in the window a

certain toy — a soldier beating a drum. By pulling a wire, the arms moved and the drum sounded. He went in and asked the price. It was fifteen-pence. Mr. Carlton bought it, and carried it away with him.

Walking quickly up the Rise, he soon came to Tupper's cottage. Mrs. Smith was seated in the parlour, darning socks; the little boy sat at the table, chattering to her and eating his supper. A bone of cold lamb was in one hand, a piece of bread in the other, and a plate was before him with some salt upon it.

"Well, and how is the little man now?" was the salutation of Mr. Carlton as he went in, with a pleasant tone and pleasant smile.

Mrs. Smith looked surprised. She had not expected the surgeon to call again that day.

"I have been thinking it might be as well if he took a little tonic medicine, which I did not order him this morning," said that gentleman, producing the bottle from his pocket. "So I brought it myself, as I was coming up here. You'll see the directions. Have the other things come?"

"Oh yes, sir; they were here by one o'clock."

"Ah, yes. And so you are eating your supper, my little man! It's rather early for that, isn't it?"

"He gets so hungry about this time," said the mother in a tone of apology. "And he is so fond of loin of lamb, he won't rest if he knows it is in the house: he likes to eat it this way, in his fingers. There's his cup of milk on the table."

"As I am here I may as well look at his knee again, Mrs. Smith," said the surgeon.

She rose from her seat to undo the bandage; but Mr. Carlton preferred to undo it himself. The boy put

down his bread and meat, and rubbed his fingers on his pinafore.

"It doesn't hurt to-night," cried he.

"That's all right then," said Mr. Carlton. "And now will you tell me your name, my little gentleman, for I have not heard it?"

"It's George, sir," interposed the mother before the child could speak. "It was his father's name."

"George, is it?" repeated Mr. Carlton, as he did up the leg again. "And where are the soldiers, George?"

"Gone home from drill," was the laughing answer. "That one stands now."

"To be sure it does," said Mr. Carlton. "Have you got one to play the drum to the rest while they are at drill?"

He took the toy from his pocket and displayed it. Nothing could exceed the child's delight at the sight. His eyes sparkled; his pale cheeks flushed a vivid crimson; his little thin hands shook with eagerness. Mr. Carlton saw what a sensitive nature it was, and he felt a pleasure as he resigned the toy.

"You are very kind, sir," exclaimed the widow, her own face lighting up with pleasure. "His fondness for soldiers is something marvellous. I'm sure I don't know any other doctor that would have done as much."

"I saw it as I came by a shop a few minutes ago; and I thought it would please him," was the reply of Mr. Carlton. "These poor sick children should have their innocent pleasures gratified when practicable. Good evening to you, Master George."

The widow followed him into the garden. Perhaps the tender tone of some words in the last sentence had

aroused her fears. "Have you a bad opinion of him, sir?" she whispered. "Won't he get well?"

"I'll do the best I can to get him well," replied Mr. Carlton. "I cannot give you an opinion yet, one way or the other."

He shook hands with her and turned away. Mr. Carlton was affable with all classes of patients, cold and impassive though his usual manners were. But had Mr. Carlton been standing with his face to the road, instead of his back, while he spoke to the woman, he would have seen a lady pass, no doubt to his astonishment, for it was his own wife.

Not more astonished, perhaps, than she was to see him. She was passing the cottage — she best knew for what purpose — and she turned her eyes stealthily towards its path. What she had hoped to see was the little boy; what she really did see was her husband, shaking hands with the boy's mother. Laura Carlton, feeling like one guilty, just as some of us may have felt when unexpectedly detected in a mean action, made one bound forward, and crouched close to the hedge, which there took a bend inwards.

Had Mr. Carlton been on his way to any other patient up the lane — and many cottages were scattered at this end of it — he must have seen her; but he turned towards South Wennock, and marched away at a quick pace.

Lady Laura came out of hiding. Her cheeks were glowing, her pulses were beating. Not altogether with thought of the detection she had escaped; there was another feeling. Conscience makes cowards of us, you know, — sad, weak, foolish cowards. It would have been so very easy for Laura, had her husband seen

her, to be doing just what she was doing, and nothing else — taking a walk down Blister Lane. She had a right to do so as well as other people had. It was a cool, shady lane, very pleasant to walk in, except after rain, and then it was apt to be over the ankles in mud. And Laura Carlton, of all people, might be supposed to cling to it from past associations, — for was it not the trysting-place that long-ago evening, when she had stolen out to meet and run away with him, now her husband?

Mr. Carlton went safely beyond sight, and Laura began to retrace her steps. Standing on one leg on the bottom bar of the low wooden gate was the little child, his new toy in his left hand. He had come limping out to look after his benefactor, Mr. Carlton. The mother had gone indoors again. Laura halted. She gazed at him for a good two minutes, saying nothing; and the boy, who had little of that timid shyness which mostly attends sensitive children, looked up at her in return.

“What’s your name?” began Laura.

“Lewis.”

“What’s your mother’s name?”

“Smith.”

“Is *that* your mother? — the — the — person who was out here a minute ago?”

“Yes,” replied the boy.

Laura’s face darkened. “How many brothers and sisters have you?”

“None. There’s only me. I had a little baby brother; but mother says he died before I was born.”

There was a long pause. Laura devoured the

child with her eyes. "Where's your father?" she began again.

"He's dead."

"Oh!" retorted Laura, scornfully. "Dead, is he! I suppose that's why your mother wears a widow's cap!"

The boy made no reply. Possibly he did not understand. Laura put her hand down over the gate and touched his light hair, pushing it back from his forehead. He held up the toy to show her.

"Yes, very pretty," said she, carelessly. But all in a moment it struck her that she had seen this toy, or one resembling it, in the toy-shop near their house. "Who gave you that?" she resumed.

"Mr. Carlton. He brought it to me just now."

Lady Laura's eyes flashed. The boy began making the soldier play the drum.

"He's to play to the others at drill," said he, looking up. "Mr. Carlton says so."

"What others?"

"My soldiers. They are shut up in the box now in mother's drawer."

"And so Mr. Carlton gave you this, did he?" repeated Laura, strangely resentful. "He has just brought it you, has he?"

"Wasn't it good of him!" returned the child, paying more attention to the plaything than to the question. "See how he drums! mother says ——"

"Lewis! Are you going to stop there all night? Come in directly and finish your supper!"

It was the interrupting voice of Mrs. Smith, calling from the cottage. Laura Carlton started as if she had been shot, and went away in the direction of South Wennock.

CHAPTER XIV.

Mr. and Lady Laura Carlton at Home.

LADY LAURA CARLTON stood in her drawing-room, dressed for dinner. Hastening home from that expedition of hers to Tupper's cottage, of which you read in the last chapter, where she saw Mr. Carlton and spoke afterwards with the little child, she made some slight alteration in her attire and descended. In the few minutes her dressing occupied, her maid thought her petulant: but that was nothing new. As she entered the drawing-room she rang the bell violently.

"Where's Mr. Carlton?"

"Not in, my lady."

"Serve the dinner."

Lady Laura Carlton was boiling over with indignation. In this little child at Tupper's cottage, she had seen what she thought a likeness to her husband, a most extraordinary likeness, and she was suffering herself to draw inferences therefrom, more natural perhaps than agreeable. She recalled with unnecessary bitterness past suspicions of disloyalty on Mr. Carlton's part, which, whether well-founded or not, *she* had believed in; she remembered their, what might be called, renewed interchange of good-feeling only on the previous night; Lady Laura now believed that he was even then deceiving her, and a miserable feeling of humiliation took possession of her spirit, and she stamped her foot in passion.

She lost sight of probabilities in her jealous indignation. An angry resentment against the woman at Tupper's cottage seated itself in her heart, filling its

every crevice. What though the woman was getting in years? though she was hard featured, singularly unattractive, not a lady? In Lady Laura's jealous mood, had she been ugly as a kangaroo it would have made no difference.

Earlier in the day, when she had first passed the cottage with Lady Jane, the likeness she detected to her husband, or fancied she detected, excited only a half doubt in her mind, a sort of disagreeable perplexity. But the doubt rankled there; and as the day went on, Lady Laura, than whom a worse or more irritable subject for this sort of suspicion could not exist, felt impelled to wend her steps thither again. She could not have gone at a worse moment: for what she saw had the effect of changing all her doubts into certainties.

She sat down to the dinner-table, scarcely able to suppress her emotion, to keep in bare subjection the indignation that was rending her heart and her temper. It was no very unusual thing for her to sit down alone, for Mr. Carlton's professional engagements rendered him somewhat irregular. The servants in waiting saw that their lady was put out, but of course it was no business of theirs. Perhaps they thought it was occasioned by the absence of their master.

In point of fact, that gentleman was even then making his way home, speeding to it in haste from a second visit to Mrs. Knagg's, which he had hurried to pay on his return from Tupper's cottage, after leaving the toy with the child. Not that a second visit there was in the least required or expected of him, and Nurse Pepperfly opened her eyes in surprise when she saw him enter. "He had just called in in passing to see

that all was going on well," he observed to the nurse; and particularly kind and attentive that functionary thought it of him. Lingered a moment, he beckoned her from the room, put a professional question or two as to the case in hand, and then led the way easily and naturally to the case at Tupper's cottage, the ailing knee of the boy.

"I suppose there is no lack of means?" he casually remarked. "The little fellow ought to have the best of nourishment."

"And so he do," was the response of Mrs. Pepperfly. "I never see a mother so fond of a child, though she's a bit rough in her ways. If he could eat gold she'd give it him. As to money, sir, there ain't no want of that; she seems to have got plenty of it."

"Have you not any idea who she can be?"

"Well, sir, in course ideas come to one promiscuous, without fetching of 'em up ourselves," answered Mrs. Pepperfly. "I should think she's the person that took away the babby — though I can't say that my memory serves me to recognise her."

"May be," carelessly remarked Mr. Carlton. "Remember that you keep a quiet tongue about this, Mrs. Pepperfly," he concluded, as he went out.

"Trust me for that, sir," readily affirmed Mrs. Pepperfly.

And Mr. Carlton, conscious that his dinner hour had struck, made haste home, and found his wife at table.

"Have you begun, Laura? Oh, that's all right. I have been detained."

Lady Laura made no reply, and Mr. Carlton took

his seat. She motioned to one of the servants to move the fish towards his master, who was the usual carver. For some minutes Mr. Carlton played with his dinner — played with it; did not eat it — and then he sent away his plate nearly untouched — and that he appeared to do throughout the meal. Lady Laura observed it, but said nothing; she certainly was, as the servants expressed it amongst themselves, “put out,” and when she did speak it was only in monosyllables or abrupt sentences.

“Are you going out this evening, Laura?” asked Mr. Carlton.

“No.”

“I thought you were engaged to the Newberrys.”

“I am not going.”

He ceased; he saw, as well as the servants, that the lady was out of sorts. She never spoke another word until the cloth had been drawn, the dessert on the table, and the servants gone. Mr. Carlton poured out two glasses of wine and handed one to Lady Laura. She did not thank him; she did not take the glass.

“Shall I give you some grapes, my love?”

“Your love!” she burst forth, with scornful, mocking emphasis. “How dare you insult me by calling me ‘your love?’ Go to your other loves, Mr. Carlton, and leave me. It is time you did.”

He looked up, astounded at the outbreak; innocent in himself, so far as he knew, of any offence that could have caused it.

“Laura! What is the matter?”

“You know,” she replied; “your conscience tells you. How dare you so insult me, Mr. Carlton?”

"I have not insulted you; I am not conscious of any offence against you. What has put you out?"

"Oh, fool that I was," she passionately wailed, "to desert, for you, my father's home! What has been my recompense? disinheritance by my father, desertion by my family, *that* I might have expected; but what has my recompense been from you?"

"Laura, I protest I do not know what can have caused this! If you have anything to say against me, say it out."

"You do know," she retorted. "Oh, it is shameful! shameful so to treat me! — to bring this contumely upon me! I, an earl's daughter!"

"You must be out of your mind," exclaimed Mr. Carlton, half doubting perhaps whether such was not the fact. "What 'contumely' have I brought upon you?"

"Don't insult me further! don't attempt to defend yourself!" retorted Laura, well nigh mad indeed with passion. "Think rather of yourself, of your own conduct. Such transgressions on the part of a married man reflect bitter disgrace and humiliation upon the wife; they expose her to the contemptuous pity of the world. And they have so exposed me."

"Pshaw!" exclaimed Mr. Carlton, growing cross, for this was but a repetition of scenes enacted before. "I thought these heroics, these bickerings, were done with. Remember what you said last night. What has raked them up?"

"You ask *me* what has raked them up! Ask yourself, Mr. Carlton. You know too well."

"By heaven, I do not! I have no more notion what you mean than *that*!" He raised a wine glass as he

spoke, and bringing it down again too fiercely, the fragments were shattered over the mahogany table.

The burst half frightened Laura. Mr. Carlton's temper was impassive as his face, and she had never witnessed such from him before. Perhaps he was surprised at himself. But he had gone home full of inward trouble, and the attack, so uncalled for, was more than he could patiently bear.

"If you wish me to understand you, Laura, so as to be able to give you any answer, you must be more explanatory," he said, resuming his equable tone of calmness.

Lady Laura's lips quivered, and she leaned over the table, speaking in a whisper, low as the unsatisfactory topic deserved.

"In that cottage of Tupper's on the Rise, a woman and a child are living. *The child is yours!*"

An extraordinary change, possibly caused by surprise at the accusation, possibly by indignation, passed over the aspect of Mr. Carlton. His face grew livid, his white lips parted. Laura noted all.

"It tells home, does it!" she exclaimed in a tone of bitter scorn. "I knew your conscience would accuse you. What have I done, I ask, that this shameless woman should be brought hither to insult me? Could you not have kept her where she came from? Must you bring her here, and parade her in my very presence?"

Mr. Carlton wiped the moisture from his face and recalled his senses, which seemed to have been scattered. He looked at his wife in very amazement.

"Suspect that woman of — You are a fool, Laura, if you are not mad. I beg your pardon, but it must

be one of the two. Until this day, when I was called in to attend the child, the woman was an utter stranger to me. Why, she looks old enough to be my mother! What are you thinking of?"

Lady Laura was thinking of a great many things, and they were not pleasant ones. Nevertheless her husband spoke so earnestly, so truthfully, that she was somewhat staggered in spite of her exasperation.

"It will come, next, that I must not visit a patient when called out to one," he proceeded in a severe tone. "You speak of shame, Laura, but I do not think it is I who ought to feel it. These absurd delusions bring yourself shame, but not me. I know nothing of the woman and her child. I solemnly declare to you that until last night I did not know Tupper's cottage was occupied, or that such people existed."

"Who summoned you to them?" inquired Laura, no relenting whatever in her words and aspect.

"Pepperfly, the nurse. I met the old woman at the gate here last night, as I was coming home from the dinner. She said a stranger with a sick child had come to Tupper's cottage, and would I go up at my leisure, and see it. If you will take the trouble to walk there, and inquire, you will find my statement correct: the boy has a white swelling in the knee."

"I have been," she replied, with sullen composure.

Mr. Carlton gave a start of anger. "Very well, my lady; if you think it well to dodge my footsteps amongst my patients, you must do so. I don't know

how I can prevent it. But if you hear nothing worse than that woman can tell you, you won't hurt."

"Mr. Carlton! keep within the bounds of truth, if you please. When did I ever dodge your footsteps?"

"It seems like it, at any rate."

"No; my passing that cottage was accidental. I was out with Jane to-day, and she had to go down Blister Lane."

"What has given rise to this suspicion?" demanded Mr. Carlton, feeling completely in the dark, "The very appearance of the woman might have shown you its absurdity. You must have gone to sleep and dreamt it."

Laura was in a cruel perplexity of mind. *Were* her suspicions right, or were they wrong? She looked ready to break a glass on her own score, and she dropped her voice again and leaned towards Mr. Carlton.

"If it be as you say, why should there be so extraordinary a likeness between you and the child?"

"A likeness between me and the child!" he echoed, in genuine surprise. "There's none in the world, none whatever. How can you so draw upon your flighty imagination?"

"There never was, I believe, so great a one in the world," was Laura's answer. "Every feature is similar, save the eyes. That is not all. Your ears are a peculiar shape, unlike any one's I ever saw; so are that child's. The very feather here," touching the parting of her own hair in front, "the wave of the flaxen hair: it is all you in miniature."

Now Mr. Carlton had failed to observe any likeness to himself; the thought of such had not crossed

his mind. It was only natural, therefore, that he should disbelieve in the existence of any, and he thought his wife was asserting it, in her jealousy, without foundation.

"This is very absurd, Laura! I had hoped these fancies were done with."

"Why should he bear your name — Lewis?" proceeded Lady Laura.

"He does not bear it," replied Mr. Carlton, looking at her in increased surprise.

"He *does*! Where is the use of your denying facts?" she angrily demanded.

"I asked the boy's name this afternoon, and his mother told me it was George. If he bears any other, all I can say, is, I do not know it. They did not mention another to me."

"I heard the woman speak to him as Lewis. The boy told me himself at the gate that his name was Lewis," reiterated Laura. "You gave him that toy!"

"I know I did. I have no children of my own; but I love children, and I often give a plaything to my little patients. Is there any harm in it?"

"Lewis is an uncommon name," she persistently resumed, fearing she was getting the worst of the argument. "And the likeness is there!"

"Upon my word, Laura, this is very absurd! If people call their children Lewis, I cannot help it. As to the likeness — pray did Lady Jane see this astounding likeness?" he broke off to ask.

"She did not say so."

"No, no. I believe you have drawn solely on your own imagination for this fancy, and that nothing of the sort exists. I can only assure you, and with truth, that I

failed to observe it, as I hardly should have failed had it been there. The boy was a stranger to me until this day."

Laura replied not. She had nearly arrived at the conclusion that she had made a very ridiculous mistake. Mr. Carlton rose and went over to her.

"Understand me, Laura," he said, in a serious and impressive tone, but one of friendly conciliation. "Whether the resemblance exists or not, it is equally unimportant to you and to me. I tell you that I was unconscious of the existence of these people until now; I tell you that, so far as I believe and know, the woman is a stranger to me. I have never known her in any way whatever; and I swear that I speak the truth, by the ties that exist between you and me!"

He held out his hand, and after a moment's struggle with herself — not caused so much by the present point at issue, for she was now pretty well convinced that the likeness and the name must be accidental, as by the remembrance of certain former grievances which Mr. Carlton had not been able so triumphantly to clear up — she gave him hers. Mr. Carlton stooped and kissed her, and she turned her face to him and burst into tears.

"If I am suspicious, you have made me so, Lewis. You should never have tried me."

"The trials have been chiefly of your own making," he whispered, "but we will not revert to the past. But now — am I to go on attending this child, or am I not, Laura? It shall be as you please; it is nothing to me one way or the other. If you wish me not, I'll hand the case over to Grey."

"Nonsense," responded Lady Laura.

CHAPTER XV.

Running for the Ointment.

THE reply, "nonsense," of Lady Laura to Mr. Carlton's question was taken by that gentleman as an intimation that he was to go on with the case. And accordingly on the afternoon of the following day, he again went up to Tupper's cottage. Mrs. Smith had the boy on her lap at the table, the soldiers before him in battle array.

"I have forgotten half my errand," the surgeon exclaimed, as he threw himself in a chair, after speaking with her and the boy. "I intended to bring up a box of ointment and I have left it behind me."

"Is it of consequence, sir?"

"Yes, it is. I wanted to put some on his knee myself. I'm dead tired, for I have been on foot all day, running about. Would it be too much to ask you to step down to my house for it? It is not far. I'll look at his leg the while."

Mrs. Smith paused, hesitated, and then said she would go. Mr. Carlton told her what to ask for: a small box done up in white paper, standing near the scales in the surgery. As she departed, he untied the linen round the child's knee, gave a cursory glance at it, and tied it up again.

"What's your name, my boy?"

"Lewis," said the child.

"I thought your mother told me yesterday it was George?"

"So it is George. It's Lewis George. Mother used to call me Lewis always, but she calls me George

sometimes since we came here. Will you please let me go to my soldiers?"

"Presently. Is your father dead?"

"He died before we came here; he died in Scotland. My black things are worn for him. Mr. Carlton, will that soldier drum always?"

"I think so," said Mr. Carlton. "George, my man, you want some fresh air, and I shall put you outside in your chair until your mother returns."

Mr. Carlton did so. He not only put the boy in his chair, but he tied him in with a towel he espied; and, carrying boy, chair, and soldiers, he placed them against the wall of the cottage outside.

"Why do you tie me in, sir?"

"That you may not get down to run about."

"I won't do that. Since my leg was bad, I don't like running."

Mr. Carlton made no reply. He went in-doors, beyond reach of the view of the boy, and there he began a series of extraordinary manœuvres. Up-stairs and down, up-stairs first, he went peeping about, now into this box, now into that; now into this drawer, now into that cupboard. One small box baffled him, for it was locked and double locked, and he thrust it back into its receptacle, inside another, for he had nothing to force it with, though he had tried his pen-knife. What was he hunting for?

Leaving everything in its place, so that no trace of the search might be found, he went down to the kitchen again, drew open a drawer, and turned over its contents. An old envelope he clutched eagerly; it contained a prescription, and nothing else, but that he did not know. He was about to dive into its folds,

when he became conscious that he was not alone. Mrs. Smith stood in the doorway, watching him with all her eyes. What on earth had brought her back so quickly? was Mr. Carlton's thought.

He dropped the envelope with a quick motion, recollected himself, and continued to look in the drawer, his manner cool and collected. "I am searching for some rag," said he, turning to her.

"Rag!" repeated Mrs. Smith, who did not appear particularly pleased at his off-hand proceedings. "I don't keep rag in those drawers. You might have waited, sir, I think, till I came home."

"You were so long," replied Mr. Carlton, "I have not the time to stop."

"Then, sir, I don't know what you'd call short," returned Mrs. Smith. "I ran all the way there and back."

Mr. Carlton took the ointment from her, repeated his request for some rag, brought the boy in, and proceeded to attend to his knee. He scanned the child's features from time to time, but could detect nothing of the resemblance spoken of by his wife. He completely made his peace with Mrs. Smith before he departed, told her laughingly always to have linen at hand ready for him, and then he should not want to look into her hiding-places.

It was not, however, quite the truth that Mrs. Smith had run all the way back. In point of fact she had not come straight back, but had taken a short *détour* out of her way. She ran there, received the ointment without delay, and set off to run back again. But ladies of middle age (to put it politely) don't run very far up a hill, be it ever so gentle a one, and Mrs.

Smith slackened her pace. Just before she got to Blister Lane she overtook Judith, Lady Jane's maid, and joined her, walking with her past the lane, for Judith was in a hurry and could not stop to talk. Mrs. Smith reminded her of her promise to come and partake of tea; but Judith said she could not for a day or two; she was busy, getting her lady's autumn dresses in order.

"It's not autumn weather yet," remarked Mrs. Smith. "It's as hot as summer."

"But nobody knows how soon it may change, and my lady likes to have her things in readiness," was Judith's answer. "I'll be sure to come as soon as I can. I shall like to come. How's the little boy?"

"He's middling. I have had Mr. Carlton to him. He is at the cottage now; I have been to his house for this salve which he left behind him. I say, he's a curious man, isn't he?"

"Curious?" repeated Judith, not understanding how to take the remark.

"Curious in regard to one's business. He asked enough questions of me; wanting to know where we came from, and where we had lived, and where the boy was born; I don't know what he didn't ask. But I think he is clever; he seems thoroughly to understand the case. And he's very kind."

"He is thought to be very clever," said Judith. "His patients like him."

Lady Jane's gate was reached; it was only a little higher than Blister Lane, on the opposite side of the way, and Mrs. Smith said good afternoon, and ran back again. Lady Jane had seen the woman at the gate, and spoke of her to Judith when the girl entered.

To tell the truth, the likeness Jane had detected in the little child to her sister Clarice, had been haunting her mind since the previous day, more than she would have cared to tell.

"So you know that person, Judith?"

"I don't know much of her, my lady. I have spoken to her once or twice in passing the cottage. She was talking of her little boy. She has had Mr. Carlton to him."

"Is that her own child?" abruptly asked Lady Jane, after a pause. "She told me it was, but I almost doubt it. For one thing, she seems too old to have so young a child."

"Well my lady, and so do I doubt it," cried Judith; "but I don't know anything certain."

"The boy bears so remarkable a likeness to — to — some one I know —"

"My lady, there never was such a likeness seen," eagerly interposed Judith. "It struck me the first moment I saw him."

"You!" rejoined Lady Jane; "struck you! Why, how did you know her? When did you see her? I spoke of my sister."

Judith stood dumb.

"I'm sure I beg your pardon, my lady; I misunderstood."

"I had another sister, of whom you have not heard, Judith. That little boy's eyes are so exactly like hers that they seem to be ever before me. What likeness did you speak of?"

"Oh my lady, it's not worth troubling you with. It was just a fancy of mine that the boy's face was like somebody's I know: not a lady's."

"Not a lady's?"

"A man's face; not a lady's."

"Ah, yes. Of course you could not have known my sister. She never was at South Wennock."

Judith lingered as if she had something on her tongue, and looked hard at Lady Jane; but she turned away without speaking. She wondered never to have heard that there was another sister: but the Chesneys, one and all, had kept the name from their households. In fact, considering the semi-publicity that had been given to the affair when the services of the police were called in by Lord Oakburn in the search after his lost daughter, it had been kept wonderfully secret. But the likeness the child bore to Clarice continued to trouble the mind of Lady Jane.

And the likeness — that other likeness — festered in the heart of Mr. Carlton's wife. In spite of her apparent satisfaction at the time of the explanation, the bitter suspicion sprung up again within her with a force that threatened mischief. There is no passion in this wide world so difficult to eradicate as jealousy.

CHAPTER XVI.

An Item of News.

LITTLE heirs are precious things, especially if they happen to be on the peerage roll of this aristocratic realm. Perhaps there was not an individual in the land more valued by those about him than was the young lord of Oakburn; and when, after his sojourn at Seaford, he seemed to languish rather than revive, his mother's fears were up in arms.

The young gentleman had caught cold soon after

they returned to London, just as other boys are liable to catch it. Complete master of Pompey, he had walked deliberately into a pond with his clothes on, in spite of that faithful retainer's efforts to prevent him, and the result was a slight attack of sore throat. It was magnified into a visitation of bronchitis, and Sir Stephen Grey was sent for. He was soon well, but the disorder left him a little languid, and the countess said she must take him out again; she would take him to some of the salubrious spas of Germany, perhaps from thence to the South of France; possibly keep him abroad for the winter or part of it.

"It's not in the least necessary," said Sir Stephen.

Lady Oakburn thought it was, and decided to go. But while she was hesitating what place to fix upon, a letter arrived from her brother, the Reverend Mr. Lethwait, who held a continental chaplaincy, and in the letter he happened to speak of the lovely climate of the place, so renovating to invalids.

It was just the turning point of the balance, the last atom of dust which made the scale go down. If there had been a remnant of indecision in Lady Oakburn's mind, whether she should go or not, whether the expedition was really necessary, this put an end to it; and the requisite orders for her departure were issued to her household forthwith.

Lucy rebelled. Lucy Chesney actually rebelled. Not against the young earl's exile from England, but against her own. She was to be married the following spring: and, as everybody knew, it would take from this time to that to prepare the wedding clothes and general paraphernalia. Frederick Grey stepped in to the rescue; he knew nothing about the clothes and the

paraphernalia; that was not in his department; but he did protest that Lady Oakburn must not be so cruel as to take Lucy away from England and from him. The countess laughed, and said then Lucy must go for the time to Lady Jane's.

Compared to the other arrangement, this seemed pleasant and feasible. Jane was communicated with, and she — only too glad to have Lucy — hastened to London to take charge of her down. When she arrived in Portland Place, and the little lord ran up to her, she gazed at him with some anxiety.

"Have you come to take away Lucy, sister Jane?"

"Yes, darling. But, Frank, who says you are ill? I think you are looking famous."

Lady Oakburn interposed with a half apology for her previous anxiety. The young gentleman had picked up his crumbs (to use Sir Stephen's expression) in so astonishing a manner the last day or two, and his face had got so blooming and himself so noisy, that her ladyship felt half ashamed of herself. But she should rejoice in the opportunity of once more meeting her brother, she avowed to Jane, and the trip would do Frank good, even if he did not want it.

Jane purposed to stay in London one clear day. She reached it on the Thursday, and would return with Lucy on the Saturday; on which day Lady Oakburn would also take her departure.

On the Friday, Jane went abroad on foot. She had several little errands to do, purchases to make, and she would not be troubled with the carriage. In fact, Jane Chesney had never cared to use a carriage so much as many do; she was a good walker and liked exercise.

It happened that her way led her through Gloucester Terrace. The reminiscences that the locality called up were bitter ones to Jane; how little she had thought, that long-ago day when she first went into it in search of Clarice, that years and years would pass and bring no trace of her!

She walked along slowly. She was just in the spot where the house of the Lortons was situated; and she was looking to see whether she could remember which it was, when a lady passed her on the pavement, — a little fat lady with a very pleasing expression of face. That expression struck upon Jane's memory. Where had she seen it?

Fearing that she had passed, without speaking, some one whom she ought to know, an acquaintance possibly of her brief London life, Jane turned in the moment's impulse, and found that the lady had also turned and was looking at her. The latter stepped back with a smile.

"Lady Jane Chesney! I beg your pardon for passing you. My thoughts were elsewhere at the moment."

It was Mrs. West! But Mrs. West grown so excessively stout that it was no wonder Jane had not recognised her. She was almost a second Mrs. Pepperfly. Jane's heart gave a glad leap, and she held out her hand. This lady seemed to be the one only link between Clarice living and Clarice lost.

And now what a singular coincidence it was that Jane should have chanced to meet her there! *Chanced?* Something more than chance was at work in this commencement — for it was the commencement, of the unravelling of the fate of Clarice Chesney.

A few moments, and Lady Jane was seated in Mrs. West's house close by, listening to that lady's explanation. They had been abroad between six and seven years, she said; had educated their four daughters well — of whom she seemed not a little fond and proud, and regretted their absence from home that day, or she would have shown them to Lady Jane — and had now come back for good to England and Gloucester Terrace. Not to the same house: that was occupied: but to one within five or six doors of it.

Jane spoke of Clarice. And Mrs. West seemed thunderstruck, really thunderstruck, to hear that no tidings had been gained of her.

"It is like a romance," she cried. "But for your telling me yourself, Lady Jane, I should scarcely have believed it. It seems so impossible in these days that any body should be lost. We read advertisements in the 'Times' of gentlemen missing; now and then of a lady; but I think — at least I have always supposed — that the ladies at least come to light again. I and Mr. West have often talked of this affair; he saw you, Lady Jane, as perhaps you may remember, the day you called at our house when I was at Ramsgate. We thought — we concluded — but perhaps you would not like me to repeat it to you?" broke off Mrs. West.

"Indeed I should," replied Jane eagerly, not that she had any idea what it was Mrs. West hesitated to repeat. "The least word, the least surmise or conjecture, bearing upon my sister is of interest for me."

"Well, then, the conclusion we came to was, that

Miss Beauchamp's marriage must have been an inferior one. That she had married in accordance with her temporary position, and did not like to avow it to her family, especially after they were ennobled. I am sure you will forgive my speaking thus freely, Lady Jane."

Jane did not altogether understand. The tone of the words surprised her ear.

"But still, we never supposed but that she would avow it in time," proceeded Mrs. West. "However inferior or unsuitable her marriage might have been, she would surely not keep it secret so long as this ——"

"What marriage?" interrupted Jane. "Clarice was not married."

"Oh yes, she was."

"Do you know that she was?" gasped Jane. "*How* do you know it?"

Mrs. West paused in surprise. She was asking herself how it was that Lady Jane did not know it; it was so long ago that she forgot partially, but at length came to the unwelcome conclusion that she had neglected to make her acquainted with it. Not with the marriage itself: of that Mrs. West knew positively nothing: but of the grounds they had for assuming it to have taken place.

"Tell me about it now," implored Jane.

"We learnt it through an old servant," said Mrs. West. "A young woman named Mary Grove, who had lived with me as parlour-maid, and left just about the time that Miss Beauchamp did. Mary had fallen into bad health — indeed she was never strong, and I used to think the work too much for her — and she

went home to be nursed. They were Suffolk people. She took another place in London when she got better; and upon calling here one day to see us some considerable time afterwards, she told me that she had met Miss Beauchamp, and saw from her appearance that she was married."

"When did she meet her? — and where?" eagerly inquired Lady Jane.

"She had met her sometime in the course of the winter subsequent to Miss Beauchamp's quitting us; at its turn, I think: I know the girl said it was a frosty day. And it was somewhere in this" — Mrs. West hesitated and spoke very slowly — "in this neighbourhood, I think, though I cannot remember precisely where. Mary accosted Miss Beauchamp, saying something to the effect that she perceived she was married, and Miss Beauchamp replied, yes she was, she had married upon leaving Mrs. West's. The girl said she seemed in great spirits, and looked remarkably well."

"When was it that you heard this?" asked Jane.

"I am not sure of the precise time, Lady Jane. It was subsequent to the interview I had with you?"

"I wish you had told me of it!"

"Indeed I am very sorry that I did not. I suppose I thought it not worth troubling you with: it was so very little news, you see; and nothing certain, no details. And in truth, Lady Jane, if I must confess it, I supposed that perhaps Miss Beauchamp did not care you should know of her marriage just at first, but would take her own time for revealing it. One thing I may mention: that this information of the girl's had the effect of removing from my mind any fear on the subject of Miss Beauchamp — I ought to say of Lady Clarice."

"I wonder whether I could see that girl?"

Mrs. West shook her head. "She is dead, poor thing. She grew ill again, and died just before we went on the Continent."

Lady Jane was turning matters over in her mind. That Clarice had married, there was now no room for a shadow of doubt. The question remained, to whom?

"If she quitted your house to be married," she said aloud to Mrs. West, "we may safely argue that she must already have made the acquaintance of the gentleman. And how could she have made it, and where could she have met him?"

"I thought that over with myself at the time the girl told me this, and it struck me that she might have met him here," was the reply. "My husband's brother was then living with us, Tom West, and a very open-hearted, pleasant young man he was. He had just passed for a surgeon, and he used to fill the house nearly with his companions, more so than I liked, but we knew he would soon be leaving, so I said nothing. Two of my cousins were on a visit to me that spring, merry girls, and they and Miss Beauchamp and Tom were much together."

"Could *he* have married her?" breathlessly interrupted Lady Jane.

"Oh no."

"Are you sure?" pursued Jane.

Mrs. West paused. It was the first time the idea had been presented to her.

"I do not think it likely," she said at length. "Tom West was of an open disposition, above concealment, and they must both have been very sly, if it did

take place — excuse my plainness of thought, Lady Jane; I am speaking of things as they occur to me. No, no. If they had wished to marry, why have concealed it? Tom West was his own master, and I am sure we should have made no objection to Miss Beauchamp; we liked her very much. If she married any one of them, it was not Tom."

"Where is Mr. Tom West?"

"Oh, poor fellow, he went abroad directly; about — let me see? — about the next February, I think. He was appointed assistant-surgeon to the staff in India, and there he died."

"What more probable than that she should have accompanied him?" exclaimed Lady Jane.

Mrs. West cast her reflections back to the past.

"I do not fancy it," she said; "it seems to me next to impossible. *With him* I am quite certain she did not go, for we saw him off, and arranged his baggage, and all that. He was at our house till he sailed. No; if he had been married, especially to Miss Beauchamp, rely upon it, Lady Jane, he would not have kept it from us."

"Other gentlemen visited at your house, you say?" continued Jane.

"Plenty of them; Tom was rich in friends. Most of them were in the medical line, students or young practitioners; I daresay you may have observed how fond they are of congregating together. All were not introduced to our society: Tom used to have them in his own room. Three or four were intimate with us, and had, as may be said, the run of the house, as Tom had."

"Who were they?" asked Jane. "It may have been one of them. What were their names?"

"Let me try and recollect," said Mrs. West; "we have mostly lost sight of them since that period. There was a Mr. Boys, who is now a doctor in good practice in Belgravia; and there was young Manning, a harum-scarum fellow who came to no good; and there was Mr. Carlton. I think that was all."

"Mr. Carlton!" repeated Jane, struck with the name. "What Mr. Carlton was that?"

"His father was a surgeon in practice at the East end of London," replied Mrs. West. "He used to be very much here with Tom."

"Was his name Lewis?"

"Lewis? Well, I think it was. Did you know him, Lady Jane?"

"A gentleman of that name married my sister, Lady Laura. I know *him*."

"He was a good-looking, clever man, this Mr. Carlton — older than Tom, and by far the most gentlemanly of them all. We have quite lost sight of him. Stay; there was another used to come, a Mr. Crane; and I don't know what became of him. We did not like him."

"If it be the same Mr. Carlton, he is in practice at South Wennock," observed Jane, very much struck, she could scarcely tell why, with this portion of the intelligence. "Our family highly disapproved of Lady Laura's choice, and declined to countenance him."

"We fancied at the time that Mr. Carlton was paying attention to one of my two cousins; at least, she did. But his visits here ceased before Tom went

out. I have an idea that he went to settle somewhere in the country."

"Did it ever occur to you to fancy that any one of these gentlemen paid attention to my sister?" inquired Jane.

"Never," said Mrs. West; "never at all. I remember that Tom and my cousins used to joke Miss Beauchamp about young Crane, but I believe they did so simply to tease her. She appeared to dislike him very much, and she could not bear being joked about him. None of us, except Tom, much liked Mr. Crane."

"And the remaining two gentlemen you have mentioned? — Mr. Manning and Mr. — I forget the other name."

"Mr. Boys, Dr. Boys now. Oh no, it was neither of them, I am sure. They were not quite so intimate with us as the rest were. If she married any one of the young men, it must lie between Tom, Mr. Carlton, and Mr. Crane; but, to hear that she had, would astonish me more than anything ever astonished me yet. Tom, I am fully persuaded, she did not marry; or Mr. Carlton either — if he had a preference any way, it was, I say, for my cousin, though the preference never came to anything. As to young Crane — if Miss Beauchamp's dislike to him was not genuine, she must have been a good actor. I cannot — looking back — I cannot think that she married any one of them," concluded Mrs. West.

This was all. It was but a little item of news. Lady Jane sat some time longer, but she had gained the extent of Mrs. West's information, and she went away revolving it.

She went down to South Wennock revolving it;

she did nothing but revolve it after she was settled at home. And the conclusion she arrived at was, that Clarice *had* married one of those young men — and she thought the one most likely was Mr. Tom West.

And what of the Mr. Carlton? Could it be the one who was now Laura's husband? Lady Jane felt little, if any, doubt of it. The description, personal and circumstantial, tallied with him in all points; and the name, Lewis Carlton, was not a common one. Ever and anon there would come over Jane, with a shiver, a remembrance of that portentous dream, in which it had seemed to be shown her that her sister Clarice was dead, and that Mr. Carlton had had some hand in causing the death. *Had* one of these young men married Clarice, and worked her ill? and was Mr. Carlton privy to it? But Jane, a just woman, shrunk from asking that question, even of her own mind. She had no grounds whatever for suspecting Mr. Carlton of such a thing; and surely it was wrong to dwell upon a *dream* for them. There was one question, however, that she could ask him in all reason — and that was, whether he was the same Mr. Carlton; if so, it was possible he could impart some information of her sister. Jane did not think it very likely that he could, but it was certainly possible.

And meantime, while Jane was seeking for an opportunity of doing this, or perhaps deliberating upon the best way of asking it, and how much she should say about Clarice, and how much she should not, a fever broke out at South Wennock.

CHAPTER XVII.

Taking the Air in Blister Lane.

A GLOOMY time had come on at South Wennock. Usually a remarkably healthy place — indeed, had it not been, the few medical men established there could not have sufficed — it was something new to have an epidemic raging, and people took alarm. The fever was a severe one, and two or three patients had died; but still it was not so bad as it might have been, as it is occasionally in other places. The town was hurriedly adopting all sorts of sanitary precautions, and the doctors were worked off their legs.

Lady Jane Chesney regretted on Lucy's account that it should have happened just now. Not that she was uneasy on the score of fear for her; Jane was one of those happy few who can put their full and entire trust in God's good care, and so be calm in the midst of danger: "Whoso dwelleth under the defence of the Most High, shall *abide* under the shadow of the Almighty." But she was sorry this sickness should prevail now, because it made the visit for Lucy a sad one.

Jane lived in the same quiet style. Since the addition to her income through the money left her by old Lady Oakburn, she had added but one man-servant to her modest household. The two maids, of whom Judith was one, and this man, comprised it. Not that Jane saved much. She dressed well, and her house-keeping was liberal; and she gave away a great deal in a quiet way. But the young, full of life, loving gaiety, might have called her house a dull one; she

feared Lucy was finding it so; and it certainly did not want the sickness and alarm, prevailing abroad, to augment it.

Jane was saying this as she sat one night alone with Lucy. They had promised to spend the evening with some friends, but just as they were about to quit home, a note was brought in from the lady to whom they were engaged. One of her servants was taken ill, and she feared it might be the fever: perhaps therefore Lady Jane would prefer to put off her visit.

"I should not have minded for myself," remarked Jane, as they sat down to a quiet evening at home, "but I will not risk it for you, Lucy. I am so sorry, my dear, that South Wennock should be in this uncertain state just now. You will have cause to remember your dull visit to me."

Lucy laughed. She did not look very dull as she sat there. Her evening dress was of gay silk; and some sort of enamelled ornaments, a necklace and bracelets glistening with their steel mountings, were on her fair neck and arms. She had taken up some embroidery, was already busy with its intricacies, and she looked up with a laughing eye at Jane.

"Indeed I am not sorry to be kept at home, Jane. Dull as you call my visit, all my work seems to get on badly: and you know I promised myself to do so much. But, Jane — if I may say one thing," Lucy added, her gay tone changing to seriousness, "*you* seem dull. You have been so ever since we came from London."

Jane paused a moment. "Not dull, Lucy, dear. I have been preoccupied: I acknowledge that."

"What about?" asked Lucy.

"I would rather not tell you, Lucy. It is only a little matter on my mind: a little doubt: something I am trying to find out. I cannot help thinking of it constantly, and I suppose it has made me silent."

You need not ask the source of Jane's preoccupation. That it was connected with her sister Clarice you will have already divined. Since the information gained from Mrs. West, that Clarice had married, Lady Jane had been unable to divest herself of an impression that that little child at Tupper's cottage was the child of Clarice. The only possible ground for her fancy was the extraordinary likeness (at least, as Jane saw it) in that child's eyes and general expression of face to Clarice. The features were not like; quite unlike; but the eyes and their look were Clarice's over again. Added to this — and perhaps the fact somewhat strengthened Jane's doubts — was the *manner* of his ostensible mother, Mrs. Smith. From the very first, Jane had thought she looked old to be the mother of so young a child; but she had hard features, and such women, as Jane knew, are apt to look much older than they really are. Several times since her return from London Jane had passed the cottage and talked to the little boy over the gate. Once she had gone in — having been civilly invited by Mrs. Smith to rest herself — and she had indirectly tried to ascertain some particulars of the child's past life: where he was born, and where he had lived. But Mrs. Smith suddenly grew uncommunicative and would not answer much. The boy was her own, she said; she had had another son, older than this, but he had died; she had married very late in life. Her husband

had occupied a good post in a manufactory at Paisley in Scotland, and there her little boy had been reared. Upon her husband's death that summer, she had left the place and come back to her native country, England. So far as that, Mrs. Smith was communicative enough; but beyond these points she would not go; and upon Lady Jane's rather pressing one or two questions, the widow was quite rude. Her business was her own, she said, and she did not recognise the right of strangers to pry into it. Lady Jane was baffled. Of course it might all be as the woman said; but there was a certain secrecy in her manner that Jane suspected. She had, however, no plea for pressing the matter further; and she preferred to wait and, as it were, feel her way. But she thought of it incessantly, and it had rendered her usually equable manner occupied and absent, so much so as to have been observed by Lucy.

"Is it anything about Laura?" asked Lucy, in answer to Jane's last observation.

"Oh no. Nothing at all."

"Do you think, Jane, that Laura is happy? She seems at times so strangely restless, so petulant."

"Lucy, I hope she is happy: I cannot tell. I have observed what you say, but I know nothing."

"Mr. Carlton seems very indulgent to her," returned Lucy.

And in point of fact, Lucy had been quite struck with this indulgence. Jane's own decision, not to visit at the house of Mr. Carlton, whether springing from repugnance, or pride, or what not, she had not strictly adhered to, but she had not seen fit to extend the prohibition to Lucy; and Lucy was often at Laura's,

and thus had an opportunity of seeing Mr. Carlton's behaviour to his wife. She told Jane that she liked Mr. Carlton better than she had liked him as a little girl; she remembered, she said with a laugh, that she then entertained a great prejudice against him; but she liked him now very well, and he was certainly fond of Laura. Jane agreed that Mr. Carlton's manners were gentlemanlike and agreeable; she had now and then met him in society, and nothing could be more courteous than was Mr. Carlton's manner to herself; but, into his house Jane still declined to enter.

"I think he has always been most indulgent to her," observed Jane. "Laura, I fear, is of a difficult temper, but — Are we going to have visitors to-night?"

The break in her sentence was caused by a visitor's knock. Impromptu evening visitors to Lady Jane Chesney were not common. The servant opened the drawing-room door.

"Mr. Frederick Grey, my lady."

Lucy threw down her embroidery. Jane smiled; the dull evening had changed for Lucy.

He came in with a radiant face. They questioned him upon his appearance in South Wennock, when they had believed him in London, reading hard for his degree. Frederick protested his Uncle John had invited him down.

"I suppose the truth is, you proffered him a visit," said Jane. "Or perhaps came without any notice to him at all."

Frederick Grey laughed. The latter was in truth the fact. But Frederick never stood on ceremony at his Uncle John's: he was as much at home there as at his father's.

And as the days went on and the sickness in South Wennock increased, Mr. John Grey declared that his nephew's visit was the most fortunate circumstance that could have happened. For the medical men were scarcely equal to the additional calls upon them, and Frederick took his full share of the duty. So, after all, the visit, which had been intended by him to be nothing but a short and delightful holiday with Lucy Chesney, was changed into one of labour, and — in one sense — disappointment. For he could only venture to see her once in a way, every other day or so; neither had he time for more; and then with all the precaution of changing his clothes.

Lady Laura Carlton's feet seemed instinctively to take her to Blister Lane, past the front of Tupper's cottage. Jealousy has carried women to more inconvenient places. The unhappy suspicion — how miserably unhappy it was to be in its ultimate effects, neither Laura nor any one else could dream of — connecting her husband with that little child, had grown to a height that was scarcely repressible; and Laura was in the dangerous frame of mind that has been metaphorically designated as touchwood — wanting but a spark to kindle it into a flame.

Not a day passed but she was walking down Blister Lane. She would take her way up the Rise, turn down the lane, pass the cottage, which was situated at this end of it, walk on a little way, and then come back again. All as if she were taking a walk to get a mouthful of fresh air. If she saw the little boy in the garden she would stop and speak to him; her jaundiced eyes devouring the likeness which she thought she de-

tected to Mr. Carlton; it seemed that she could never tire of looking at it.

It was not altogether the jealousy itself that took Lady Laura there, but a determination that had sprung out of it. A resolve had seated itself firmly in her mind to sift the matter to its very foundation, to bring to light the past. She cared not what means she used: the truth she would know, come what would. Of a sufficiently honourable nature on the whole, Lady Laura forgot honour now; Mr. Carlton had reproached her with "dodging" his steps; she was prepared to do that, and worse, in her route of discovery.

It might have been described as a disease, this mania that was distracting her. *What* did she promise herself would be gained by these hauntings of Blister Lane? She did not know; all that she could have told was, that she was unable to rest away from the place. For one thing, she wanted to ascertain how frequently Mr. Carlton went to the cottage.

But fortune had not favoured her. Not once had she chanced to light upon the time that Mr. Carlton paid his professional visit. Had she met him — of which there was of course a risk — an excuse was ready. As if fate wished to afford her a facility of operation, Lady Laura had become acquainted with the fact that a young woman, expert in fine needlework, lived in Blister Lane; she immediately supplied her with some, and could have been *going there to see about it* had she been inconveniently met.

One gloomy day in November, Laura bent her steps in the usual direction. It did not rain, but the skies were lowering, and anybody might have supposed that Lady Laura was better indoors than out. She,

however, did not think so. In her mind's fever, outward discomfort was as nothing.

As she passed the gate of Tupper's cottage, Mrs. Smith, in her widow's cap, was leaning over it, gazing in the direction of South Wennock, as if expecting some one. She looked at Laura as she came up; but she did not know her for the wife of Mr. Carlton. And Lady Laura, with averted eyes and a crimson blush on her haughty cheeks, went right into the road amidst the mud, rather than pass close to the gate. It was the only time she had seen Mrs. Smith since that first day, for the widow kept much to the house.

On went Laura in her fury; and she never turned until she came to the cottage of the seamstress. It seemed that she required an excuse to her own mind for being in the lane that day. The conclusion she had arrived at in her insensate folly was, that the woman was looking impatiently for the advent of Mr. Carlton. What passion that this earth contains can ever befool us like that of jealousy!

She went in, gave some directions about the work, so confused and contradictory as nearly to drive the young woman wild, and then retraced her fierce steps back again. Very excessively astonished was she, to see, just on this side of Tupper's cottage, a sort of hand-carriage standing in the middle of the road path, and the little boy seated in it. He looked weak and wan and pale, but his beautiful eyes smiled a recognition of Lady Laura.

"Why are you here?" she asked.

"She took off her pattens and forgot them, and she has got a hole in her boot," lucidly replied the child.

"Who's 'she'?" resumed Laura.

"The girl that Mr. Carlton sent. He says I must go out as long as I can, and she comes to draw me. The drum's broke," continued the boy, his countenance changing to intense trouble; "Mr. Carlton broke it. He kissed me because I didn't cry, and he says he'll bring me another."

"Is Mr. Carlton there now?" hastily asked Laura, indicating the cottage.

"Yes. It was the drum broke, not the soldier. He hit it too hard."

The clanking of pattens was heard in the garden path, and a stout-looking country girl came forth. She knew Lady Laura by sight, and curtsied to her. Laura recognised her as a respectable peasant's daughter who was glad to go out by day, but who could not take a permanent situation on account of a bed-ridden mother.

"The little boy looks ill," remarked Lady Laura, rather taken to, and saying any words that came uppermost.

"Yes, my lady; and they say he is weaker to-day than he has been at all."

"Mr. Carlton says so?"

"His mother says so. Mr. Carlton hasn't seen him yet. He has not been to-day."

Laura strode away, vouchsafing no further notice of the speaker, not so much as a word of adieu to the little child. In her heart of hearts she believed the girl was telling her a lie; was purposely deceiving her; and that Mr. Carlton was even then inside the cottage. The child's words, "the girl that Mr. Carlton sent," were beating their refrain on her brain. Why should

Mr. Carlton send a girl to draw out any child, unless he held some peculiar interest in him? she was asking herself. Ah, if she could but have seen the thing as it actually had been! — how innocent it was! When the boy got past running about, Mr. Carlton said he must still go into the open air. The mother hired this little carriage, and was regretting to Mr. Carlton that she could not hear of a fit person to draw it; he thought at once of this young woman; he was attending the mother at the time; and said he would send her. That was the whole history. Laura Carlton, in her blind jealousy, knew not the bed that she was preparing for herself.

She went straight home, walking fast, and entered the house by the surgery entrance, as she would do now and then in impatient moods, when she could not bear to wait while the street door was opened. Mr. Carlton's assistant, Mr. Jefferson, was standing there, and raised his hat to her.

"When do you expect Mr. Carlton in?" she asked, as she swept past.

"Mr. Carlton is not out, Lady Laura."

"Mr. Carlton is out," she rejoined, turning her angry face upon the surgeon.

He looked surprised. "Indeed no, Lady Laura. Mr. Carlton came in about half an hour ago. He is down in the drug-room."

Lady Laura did not believe a word of it. Were they *all* in league to deceive her? She turned to the lower stairs, determined to see with her own eyes and confute the falsehood. This drug-room, sometimes styled shortly the cellar, was a small boarded apartment, to which access could be had only through the cellar.

Mr. Carlton kept drugs and other articles there pertaining to his profession; the servants had strict orders never to enter it, lest, as Mr. Carlton once told them, they might set their feet on chemical materials of a combustible nature, and get blown up. They took care to keep clear of it after that warning.

Lady Laura passed through the cellar and peered in. Standing before an iron safe, its door thrown wide open, was Mr. Carlton. Laura saw what looked like bundles of papers and letters within it; but so entirely astonished was she to see her husband, that a sudden exclamation escaped her.

You have heard of this room and this safe before. Mr. Carlton once locked up a letter in it which he had received from his father, the long-ago evening when he first heard of the illness of Mrs. Crane. Laura knew of the safe's existence, but had not felt any curiosity in regard to it. She had penetrated to this room once in her early married days, when Mr. Carlton was showing her over the house, but never since.

A sudden exclamation escaped her. It appeared to startle Mr. Carlton. He shut the safe door in evident haste, and turned round.

"Laura! Is it you? Whatever do you want down here?"

Laura was unable to say at the moment what she wanted, and in her perplexity spoke something very near the truth. Mr. Jefferson had said he was there, but she thought he was out, and came to see.

She turned away while she spoke, and Mr. Carlton looked after her in surprise, as she made her way quickly up the stairs.

So in this instance, at least, there had been no

treachery, and Lady Laura, so far, might have sat down with a mind at rest. The little child had evidently misunderstood her question, when she asked whether Mr. Carlton was indoors then.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Lady Jane brought to her Senses at Last.

ON the morning subsequent to this, Lady Jane and Lucy were sitting together after breakfast. Lucy had complained of a headache; she was leaning her head upon her hand, when Judith came in with a note. It proved to be from Lady Laura. She had twisted her ankle, she said; was consequently a prisoner, and wished Lucy to go and help her to pass a dull day.

"I should like to go, Jane," said Lucy. "A walk in the air may take my headache off."

"You are sure you have no sore throat?" asked Jane, somewhat anxiously. She had put the question once before.

Lucy smiled. Of course people were suspicious of headaches at this time! "I don't think I have any sore throat, Jane; I ate my breakfast very well. I did not sleep well last night, and that has made my head feel heavy."

On her arrival at Mr. Carlton's, Lucy found Laura on a sofa in her dressing-room; a pretty apartment on the first floor.

"Are you quite an invalid?" asked Lucy.

"Not quite; I can manage to limp across the room. But the ankle is swollen and rather painful. Did Jane object to your coming?"

"Not at all. How did you contrive to hurt it, Laura?"

"I was in mischief," returned Lady Laura, with a half laugh. "And you know, when people do get up to mischief on the sly, punishment is sure to follow. Don't our first lessons in the spelling-book tell us so?"

"What was the mischief?" returned Lucy.

"I and Mr. Carlton are not upon the best of terms; there is a grievance between us," was Laura's answer. "You need not look so serious, Lucy; I do not mean to imply that we are cat-and-dog, but we are not precisely turtle-doves. He has secrets which he keeps from me; I know he has; and get at them I will. There's deceit abroad just now, and I vow and declare I'll come to the bottom of it."

Lucy listened in wondering surprise. Laura would say no more. "No," she observed, "it is nothing particularly suitable to your ears: let it pass, so far. He has got a strong iron safe in the cellar, and in this safe he keeps papers and letters and things; I know, because I went down yesterday, when he had the lid open, and he started like a coward when he saw me, and shut it to. Well, I thought I should like to see what there is in that safe, and I stole down to the cellar last night with my bunch of keys, to try whether any one of them would unlock it."

"Oh, Laura!" broke forth Lucy, shocked and pained beyond expression. "How could you think of such a thing? — how could you do it?"

"Wait until you have a husband like Mr. Carlton, who puts your temper up with his underhand ways, and then see what you would 'think' and 'do'," retorted Lady Laura.

And Lucy ventured no further remonstrance, for she had once been a child under Laura's control, and was somewhat in awe of her still.

"I went in the dark, lest the servants should see me," proceeded Lady Laura, "taking some wax matches with me, to light when I got down. All went well; I tried the keys (none of which fitted, so I was baffled there), and blew out my lights to come back again. We have to go down three steps in coming out of the drug-room, where the safe is, and mount two to get into the cellar — wretched incapables the builders must have been, to make you go down steps only to come up again! Well, Lucy, I slipped on something at the top of these three steps, something sticky, it seemed, and down I went to the bottom. I could hardly get up at first, for pain in my foot, and a regular fright I was in, fearing I must call the servants; however, I did succeed in crawling back. There's the history."

And a very creditable one! Lucy sat in wonder.

"I have told it you out of bravado," continued Laura, who seemed to be in a reckless mood, "and you may repeat it to Jane, if you like. When he came home he wanted to know how I had done it. 'Slipped,' I answered; and he got no more out of me."

A silence ensued, which Lucy broke, passing to another theme. "We heard a rumour, Laura, that Mr. Carlton was likely to give up his practice here. Frederick Grey mentioned it."

"He says he shall. I don't know. Of course London's the best field for a medical man. Talking of Frederick Grey, what's the reason that Mr. Carlton dislikes him so much?"

"I know nothing about it," replied Lucy.

"I heard him going on to Mr. Jefferson about Frederick Grey's being down here interfering with the practice. There never was any love between them. Young Grey used to be very free with his tongue, saying, Mr. Carlton drove his father from the town."

"As he did," returned Lucy, quietly. "At least it was so reported in the old days, I remember. But that is all past and done with, and Frederick was but a boy then. He is not interfering with Mr. Carlton's practice."

"No; Mr. Carlton would see him far enough away, rather than allow that. Lucy! are you ill? Your eyes look heavy, and your cheeks are flushed."

Lucy had been bending her head upon her hand for the last few moments, as she had done earlier in the morning at her sister Jane's. "I got up with a headache," she replied, lifting her eyes wearily. "I thought the air, as I came along, might have done it good, but it has not, and my throat is getting sore."

"Throat getting sore!" echoed Laura. An instant's pause, and she started from the sofa in consternation, forgetting her lameness, seized her sister, and drew her to the light of the window.

"Lucy! it cannot be! you are never going to have the fever!"

"Oh no, of course I am not," was the answer.

But Lucy *was* going to have the fever. In fact, Lucy had got the fever. And Lady Jane did not know of it until night, when she was expecting Lucy home; for Laura, from carelessness or from some other motive, never sent to tell her. At nine o'clock the footman was dispatched with the news, but it was Mr. Carlton who sent him.

Lady Jane could not believe it. It was simple Jonathan, and she did think the man must have made some mistake. Lady Lucy was in bed, he said. She had been taken ill soon after reaching their house. Mr. Carlton was out at the time, but on his return he pronounced it to be the fever. He had charged Jonathan to give his respects to Lady Jane, and to assure her that every care and attention should be paid to the invalid.

Now nothing in the world could have been much less welcome than this news to Lady Jane Chesney. To her mind there was something of duplicity in their thus taking possession of Lucy, and she complained privately to Judith. Apart from Lady Jane's anxiety for Lucy, she had an unconquerable aversion to her lying ill at Mr. Carlton's, to her being attended by that gentleman, or to herself becoming an inmate, however temporarily, in his house, which she must do, were Lucy to remain. She took a moment's counsel with herself, for Lady Jane was one who rarely did things upon impulse, then attired herself for walking, and proceeded to Mr. Carlton's, taking Judith with her, and ordering her own footman to go as quickly as he could to Mr. Grey's and bring back that gentleman to Mr. Carlton's.

The best room, a large and handsome spare chamber adjoining Lady Laura's dressing-room, had been hastily prepared for Lucy. She was lying in it, looking flushed and anxious, and complaining of her head and throat.

"Jane," she whispered, as her sister bent over her, "Mr. Carlton says it is the fever. I wish I could have been at home with you!"

"You should have returned the instant you found yourself getting worse, Lucy," was Jane's answer. "I thought you were possessed of common sense, child. Laura, *you* ought to have sent her; where was your carriage, that she could not have the use of it?"

"It was not her fault — or mine," replied Laura. "Mr. Carlton administered some remedies this morning soon after we found she was ill, and he wished to watch the effect; to-night he says she is too ill to go. But, if you will allow me to express my private opinion, Jane, I should say that it has all happened for the best; for where can she be so well attended to as in the house of a medical man? And you may be sure she shall have good nursing."

"Laura, I would rather have her with me; she is under my charge, you know. I wonder if she can be moved now?"

"You must be stupid to think it," returned Laura.

"I told Mr. Carlton I felt well enough to be taken home," spoke Lucy, "but he said I did not understand the risk. I think I might be taken, Jane."

Jane inquired after Mr. Carlton. He was in the dining-room, taking some refreshment after a hard day's work, and she went to him. He rose in astonishment. Lady Jane Chesney in *his* house.

"Mr. Carlton," she said, speaking quietly in spite of her anger, and she did feel very angry, "I have come to convey Lady Lucy home. I fancy it may be done without risk."

"Impossible, Lady Jane. It might cost her her life."

"I cannot but think, sir, before you had assumed to yourself the responsibility of keeping her, that you

might have sent to inquire my pleasure upon the subject," returned Lady Jane, with dignity. "The fever must be quite at its earliest stage, and there was no reason why she could not have been sent home. She was well enough to walk here this morning, and she was, I make no doubt, not sufficiently ill to debar her returning this evening."

"It has come on very rapidly indeed," replied Mr. Carlton; "and I think she will have it badly."

"I still wish to take her, if possible," persisted Jane, somewhat agitated at the last words, "and I have dispatched a messenger for Mr. Grey, that he may come here and give me his opinion upon the point. In doing this, I wish to cast no slight upon your judgment and skill, Mr. Carlton, but Mr. Grey is my own attendant, and I have unusual confidence in him; moreover, he will not be prejudiced, for her removal or against it. You and I, sir, perhaps are so; though on opposite sides."

"I do not understand you," spoke the surgeon.

"I am prejudiced in favour of taking her; you, in favour of keeping her; Mr. Grey, on the contrary, will give his honest opinion, for he can have no motive to be biassed either way."

"Yes he can," rejoined Mr. Carlton. "A profitable patient will fall into his hands, if he gets her away."

True, so far; but the words vexed Jane. "She will be his patient in either case, Mr. Carlton. I mean, I say, no reflection on your skill; but my own doctor must attend on Lady Lucy, wherever she may be."

The cold, haughty tone of the words and manner, the "*Lady Lucy*," stung Mr. Carlton. Jane's treatment of him, her utter rejection of any intimacy, had

been boiling up within him for years. He so far forgot his usual equanimity, he so far forgot himself, as to demand, with a flash of passion and a word that had been better left unsaid, whether he was not as efficient as John Grey. Jane put him down with calm self-possession.

"Sir, it is true that my sister is your wife; but I beg you not to forget that I am Lady Jane Chesney, and that a certain amount of respect is due to me, even in your house. I do believe you to be as efficient as Mr. Grey; that your skill is equal to his; but that is not the question. *He* is my medical attendant, and I would prefer that he took the case."

"It's well known, sir, that when people are ill, there's no place seems to them like home," interposed Judith, who had quite adopted her lady's prejudices in the affair, and followed her to Mr. Carlton's presence. "We'd a great deal better have her at home."

Before any rejoinder could be made, a noise was heard in the hall, and Mr. Carlton turned to it, Jane following him. Frederick Grey had entered: and Mr. Frederick was in a state of agitation scarcely suppressible. He caught hold of Lady Jane.

"My uncle was out, and I came in his stead," he cried, his words rendered half unintelligible by emotion. "Where is she? Is she very ill?"

An altercation ensued. Mr. Carlton, whose temper was up (a most unusual thing with him) stepped before his visitor to impede his way to the stairs.

"Mr. Frederick Grey, I cannot permit you to be in my house. Had your uncle come, I would have received him with all courtesy; but I wish to know by what right you intrude."

"I don't intrude willingly," was the answer. "I have come to see Lady Lucy Chesney."

"You cannot see her. You shall not pass up my stairs."

"Not see her!" echoed Frederick, staring at Mr. Carlton as though he thought he must be out of his mind. "Not see her! You don't know what you are saying, Mr. Carlton. She is my promised wife."

He would have borne on to the stairs; Mr. Carlton strove to prevent him, and by some means the gas became extinguished; possibly the screw was touched. The servants were in the hall; hearing the altercation, they had stolen into it; Lady Laura, with her damaged foot, was limping down the stairs. The women servants shrieked at finding themselves in sudden darkness; they were perhaps predisposed to agitation from the dispute; and Lady Laura shrieked in concert, not having the faintest notion what there could possibly be to shriek at.

Altogether it was a scene of confusion. The women ran close to their master for protection, they knew not from what, and Frederick Grey, pushing everybody aside with scant courtesy, made his way to the staircase. Mr. Carlton would have prevented him, but was impeded by the servants, and at the same moment some words were whispered in a strange voice in his ear.

"Would you keep her here to poison her on her sick bed, as you did another?"

Simultaneously with this, there was some movement at the hall door: a slight bustle or sound as if somebody had either come in or gone out. It had been ajar the whole of the time, not having been closed after

Frederick Grey's entrance, for Lady Jane's footman stood outside, waiting for orders.

Mr. Carlton — all his energy, all his opposition gone out of him — stood against the wall, wiping his face, which had turned cold and moist. But that he had heard Frederick Grey's footsteps echoing up the stairs beforehand, he would have concluded that the words came from him. Somebody struck a match, and Mr. Carlton became conscious, in the dim flash of light, that there was a stranger present, — a shabby-looking man who stood just within the hall. What impulse impelled the surgeon, he best knew, but he darted forward, seized, and shook him.

"Who are you, you villain?"

But Mr. Carlton's voice was changed, and he would not have recognised it for his own. The interloper contrived to release himself, remonstrating dolefully.

"I'm blest if this is not a odd sort of reception when a man comes for his doctor! What offence have I been guilty of, sir, to be shook like this?"

It was inoffensive little Wilkes, the barber from the neighbouring shop. Mr. Carlton gazed at him in very astonishment in the full blaze of the relighted gas.

"I'm sure I beg your pardon, Wilkes! I thought it was — Who came in or went out?" demanded Mr. Carlton, looking about him in all directions.

The servants had seen no one. It was dark.

"I came along to fetch you, sir," explained the barber, who sometimes had the honour of operating on Mr. Carlton's chin. "My second boy's a bit ill, and we think it may be the fever. I wasn't for coming for you till morning, sir, but the wife made a fuss and

said there were nothing like taking disorders in time; so when I shut up my shop, I come. I suppose you took me for a wild bear, a marching in without leave."

"Did you meet anybody, or see anybody go out?" asked Mr. Carlton, leaving the suggestion of the wild bear unanswered.

"I didn't, sir. I was going round to the surgery, when I see the hall light disappear, and heard some women's scream. Naterally I come straight in at the big door; I wondered whether anybody was being murdered."

At the foot of the stairs, standing side by side, contemplating all these proceedings with astonishment, and not understanding them, were the ladies, Jane and Laura. They asked an explanation of Mr. Carlton.

"I — I — thought I heard a stranger; I thought some one had come in. I feel sure some one did come in," he continued, peering about him still in a curious kind of way.

"Will you step down, please, sir, to the boy?"

"Yes, yes, Wilkes, I'll be with him before bed-time," replied Mr. Carlton. And the forgiving little barber turned away meekly, and met Mr. John Grey coming in.

Frederick Grey, unimpeded, had made his way upstairs. An open door, and a light inside, guided him to Lucy's chamber. Ill as she was, she uttered an exclamation of remonstrance when she saw him, and covered her face with her hot hands.

"Oh, Lucy, my darling! To think that it should have attacked you!"

"Frederick! what do you do here? Where is Jane? It is not right."

He drew away her hands to regard her face, he passed his own cool hand across her brow; he took out his watch to count the beatings of the pulse.

"I am here in my professional capacity, Lucy; don't you understand? Could I entrust my future wife to any one else?" he asked, in a voice that literally trembled with tenderness. "I have been at the bedside of patients to-day, love, young and delicate as you."

"I do feel very ill," she murmured.

The fear that was over him increased as he gazed upon her, stopping the life-blood at his heart. What if he should lose her? — if this scourge should take her away from him and from life? And of course there was only too much reason to fear that it might have been communicated to her through his visits. A scalding tear dropped on to her face, and Lucy, looking up, saw that his eyes were wet.

"Am I then so very ill?" she murmured.

"No, no, Lucy; it is not that. But this has come of my imprudence: I ought to have kept away from you; and I cannot bear that you should suffer pain! Oh, my darling ——"

They were coming in, Mr. Grey and Lady Jane. The experienced surgeon moved his nephew from the bed, as if the latter were but a tyro. And indeed he was such, in comparison with the man of long practice.

Mr. Grey could not recommend Lucy's removal; quite the contrary. He saw no reason why she should not have been taken home at first, he said; but it had better not be attempted now. Jane was deeply annoyed, but she could only acquiesce.

"It cannot be helped," she said, with a sigh. "But I am grievously vexed that she should be ill, away from my house. Remember, she is in your charge, Mr. Grey."

"In mine? What will Mr. Carlton say to that?"

"It is of no consequence to me what he says," was the reply. "I cast no slight upon Mr. Carlton's skill; I have told him so; and if he chooses to attend her, conjointly with you, I have no objection whatever. But Lucy's life is precious, and I have confidence in you, Mr. Grey, from old associations."

Frederick Grey found that he was to be excluded from the sick-room. His attendance as a medical man was not necessary. And both Mr. Grey and Lady Jane thought his visits might tend to excite Lucy. In vain he remonstrated: it was of no use.

"She is to be my wife," he urged.

"But she is not your wife yet," said Mr. Grey, "and you may trust her safely to me. Be assured that if dangerous symptoms appear, you shall be the first to hear of them."

"And to see her," added Lady Jane.

With this he was obliged to be content. But he was terribly vexed over it. He stooped to kiss her hot lips in the impulse of the moment's tenderness.

"Don't — don't," she murmured. "You may take the fever."

"Not I, child. We medical men are feverproof. Oh, Lucy, my best and dearest, may God bring you through this!"

Mr. Carlton was pleased to accept the alternative, and agreed, with some appearance of suavity, to attend Lucy in conjunction with Mr. Grey. Putting aside

the implied reflection on his skill — and this, Jane reiterated to him again, was not intended — he had no objection to the visits of Mr. Grey. The fact was, Mr. Carlton would have liked to bring Lucy triumphantly through the illness himself, as he felt confident he could do; she would have had his best care, looking for no reward, as his wife's sister; and he felt mortified that the case should have been partially taken out of his hands. It was a slight, let Lady Jane say what she would; he felt it, and no doubt the town would be free enough in its comments.

"And now, Laura," said Jane, seeking her sister, "as you and Mr. Carlton have saddled yourselves with Lucy, you must also be troubled with me and Judith, who is invaluable in a sick-room. I shall not move out of this house until I can take Lucy with me."

Lady Laura clapped her hands in triumph. "Well done, Jane! You, who would not condescend to put your foot over our door-step, to be brought to your senses at last! It serves you right, Jane, for your abominable pride."

"It has not been pride," returned Jane. "Pride has not kept me away."

"What then? Prejudice?"

"No matter now, Laura; we have an anxious time before us. Mr. Grey thinks that Lucy will be very ill."

"Just what Mr. Carlton said; and he kept her here to take care of her. I am sure he will be glad to extend a welcome to you, Jane, as long as you choose to stay with us. He has always been willing to be friendly with you, but you would not respond.

He takes prejudices; I acknowledge that; but he never took one against you. He has taken one against Judith."

"Against Judith! What has she done to Mr. Carlton?" asked Jane, in surprise.

"Nothing. But he does not like her face. He says it always strikes him as being disagreeable. I like Judith, and I'm sure she's a faithful servant."

Mr. Carlton, inquire as he would, was unable to discover how that whisper could have come to him. That some one had entered the hall and gone out again, he did not entertain a doubt. He made inquiries of Lady Jane's footman, whether he had seen any one enter; but the man acknowledged that he had not been in the way to see. After the entrance of Mr. Frederick Grey, he had waited a minute or two, and then had gone round to the servants' entrance by the surgery.

So Mr. Carlton was as wise as before. And meanwhile no one could think why he should fancy that any stranger had been in the hall, in addition to little Wilkes the barber.

CHAPTER XIX.

Danger.

LADY LUCY CHESNEY lay in imminent danger. But a few days ill, and her life was despaired of. The anticipations of the surgeons — that she would have the fever badly — had been all too fully borne out. They had done what they could for her, and it was as nothing.

None could say that Mr. Carlton was not a kind

and anxious attendant. Lady Jane thanked him in her heart. She began half to like him. That he was most solicitous for Lucy's recovery was indisputable; and it may be said that she was in his hands, not in Mr. Grey's, because his opportunities of seeing her were of necessity so much more frequent. Jane sat by the bed, full of grief, but not despairing as those who have no hope. She possessed sure confidence in God; full and perfect trust; she had learnt to commit all her care to Him; and to those who can, and do, so commit it, utter despair never comes. Jane believed that every earthly means which skill could devise was being tried for the recovery of Lucy; and if those means should fail, it must be God's will; she tried to think, because she *knew*, that it would still be for the best, although they in their human grief might repine and see it not.

Lady Laura also had taken the fever. But she had it in so very slight a degree that she need not have lain in bed at all; and before the worst had come for Lucy, she was, comparatively speaking, well. Laura was exacting; it was in her nature so to be; and Lady Jane had to quit Lucy's room for hers, often, when there was not the least necessity for it. Mr. Carlton was anxious and attentive, but he knew from the first there would be no danger, and he told Laura so. The result was that she called him "unfeeling." An unmerited reproach; if ever man was anxious for the well-doing of his wife, that man was Mr. Carlton.

Frederick Grey went in once with his uncle to Lucy's chamber, after the danger supervened. She did not know him; and he had only the pain of

seeing her turn her head from side to side in the delirium of fever. If Lady Jane did not despair, he did; the sight nearly unmanned him.

"Oh, merciful Heaven, save her!" he inwardly murmured. "Save her, if only in compassion to me!"

It was not alone the dreadful grief for Lucy; it was the self-reproach that was haunting him. He assumed that the disorder must have been communicated to Lucy through him, and remorse took hold of him. What could he do? — what could he do? He would have sold his own life willingly then, to save that of Lucy Chesney.

He went straight from the sick-chamber to the telegraph-office at Great Wennock. South Wennock had been in a state of resentment some time at having to go so far if it wanted to telegraph, and most certainly Frederick Grey indorsed the indignation now. Then he went back to South Wennock, to Mr. Carlton's. Jonathan advanced from his post in the hall to the open door: open that day, that there might be neither knock nor ring.

"Do you know how she is now?" he asked, too anxiously excited to speak with any sort of ceremony.

"There's no change, sir. Worse, if anything."

He suppressed a groan as he leaned against the pillar. Chary of intruding into Mr. Carlton's house, after that gentleman's reception of him the first night of Lucy's illness, he would not enter now. He tore a leaf from his pocket-book, wrote some words on it in pencil, folded, and gave it to Jonathan.

"Let Lady Jane have this when there's an opportunity. But don't disturb the sick-room to give it her."

The paper, however, soon found its way to Jane. She opened it in some curiosity.

"I have telegraphed for my father. He may not be able to do more than is being done, but it will at least be a satisfaction. He knows Lucy's constitution, and there's something in that. If I lose her, I lose all I care for in life."

Words quiet and composed enough; scant indication did they give of the urgent, impassioned nature of the message gone up to Sir Stephen.

Jane approved of what he had done. Though she put little faith in further advice being of avail, it would, as he said, be a satisfaction. She wished Lady Oakburn was as much within their reach as Sir Stephen Grey; if the worst happened to Lucy, the blow to her almost more than mother would be bitter.

Dangerous illness connected with our history was in another habitation of South Wennock that day. The little boy at Tupper's cottage, of whom mention has been so frequently made, and who had created doubt and speculation in more minds than one, had become rapidly worse in the past week; and Mr. Carlton saw that he could not save him. Greatly worked as Mr. Carlton just then was out of doors, — having Lucy in her danger on his hands at home, not to speak of his exacting wife — he had not on this day been able to go to the cottage. Mr. Jefferson went up and brought back the report: the boy was no better, and the mother excessively anxious.

"She did not like my calling," observed the assistant-surgeon to Mr. Carlton. "She said she hoped you would be able to get up to-day, if only for a minute."

Mr. Carlton made no particular answer. He would go if he could, but did not think time would permit him; and he knew his going could do the child no good.

Mrs. Smith, to her own surprise, found she was to be favoured with a levee that afternoon. The little fellow, for whom a temporary day-bed had been made up in the parlour, was lying upon it asleep, and Mrs. Smith sat by him. The leg gave him a great deal of pain now, but it seemed easier than it was in the morning; and in these easy intervals he was sure to sleep. The young woman, whom you saw drawing the child's carriage not long ago, had come into the house entirely, by Mrs. Smith's desire, to do the work, go on errands, anything that might be required; and there's always enough to do in illness. She was out now: having had leave to go and see her mother; and Mrs. Smith had fallen into a doze herself, when she was aroused by a sharp knock at the cottage door.

She went into the kitchen and opened it. There stood a little shrivelled woman in a black bonnet, with a thin, battered-looking sort of face. Mrs. Smith had seen her before, though she retained not the slightest recollection of her; and the reader has seen her also.

It was the Widow Gould from Palace Street. She had been honoured by a call from Mrs. Pepperfly that morning, which led, as a matter of course, to a dish of gossip; and the result was, that the widow became acquainted for the first time with Mrs. Smith's presence at South Wennock, and Mrs. Pepperfly's various speculations arising therefrom. Consequently the widow — and there were few more curious widows living — thought she could not do better than go up to the cottage and claim acquaintance.

Mrs. Smith received her with some graciousness. The truth was, Mrs. Smith was growing rather out of conceit of the plan of secrecy she had adopted since her sojourn at South Wennock. Her only motive for it (if we except a natural reserve, which was habitual) had been that she thought she might find out more particulars of Mrs. Crane's death as a stranger, *if* there was anything attendant on that death which needed concealment. Until she heard of the death, she had not the remotest idea of any concealment. But the plan had not seemed to answer, for Mrs. Smith could learn no more than she had learnt at the commencement, and she talked readily enough with the widow.

Upon hospitable thoughts intent, Mrs. Smith set out her tea-table; laying the tray in the kitchen, not to disturb the little sleeper in the parlour. It's true it was barely three o'clock, rather an early hour for the meal; but it has become fashionable, you know, to take a cup of tea early. Before they had sat down to it, another visitor arrived. It was Judith Ford.

It appeared that Judith had been obliged to come to Cedar Lodge that afternoon upon some matter of business: and Lady Jane had told her to call in and ask after the little boy at the cottage. Jane had heard of his increasing illness; and she thought much of him even in the midst of her anxiety for Lucy.

"It's like magic, your both meeting here together!" exclaimed Mrs. Smith.

For there was always a feeling resting in the woman's mind that the whole known circumstances connected with Mrs. Crane's death had not been detailed to her: a continuous hope that a chance word might reveal to her something or other new. Judith

said she could stop for a quarter of an hour, and Mrs. Smith handed her some tea in triumph, for the promised tea-drinking bout, when Judith was to spend an evening at the cottage, had not taken place yet. What with Lady Jane's visit to London, and Lucy's sojourn with them, and one thing or other, Judith had not been able to find the time for it.

It would have been strange had the conversation not turned upon that long-past tragedy. The Widow Gould, who loved talking better than anything else in the world, related *her* version of it, and the other widow listened with all her ears. Mrs. Gould, it must be remembered, had never admitted, in conjunction with the nurse, that there could be truth in that vision of Mr. Carlton's, touching the man on the stairs; it a little exasperated both of them to hear it spoken of, and she began disclaiming against it now. A needless precaution, since Mrs. Smith had never before heard of it. It appeared, however, to make a great impression upon her, now that she did hear it.

"Good Heavens! And do you mean to say that man was not followed up?"

"There wasn't no man to follow," testily returned the Widow Gould, upon whom the past seven or eight years had not sat lightly, and she looked at least sixty-six. "I've never liked Mr. Carlton since, I know that. It might have took away our characters, you know, ma'am."

Mrs. Smith did not appear to know anything of the sort, or even to hear the delicate allusion. She had risen from her seat to fill the teapot from the kettle on the fire; but she put it down again in haste.

"It was just the clue I wanted!" she exclaimed.

"Just the clue. I thought it so strange that he had not been here; so strange, so strange! It was more unaccountable to me than all the rest."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed the little shrivelled woman, staring at the evident excitement.

"I mean her husband. The man concealed on the stairs must have been her husband."

"What, Mr. Crane?"

"Of course it was. *He* killed her. I feel as certain of it as if I had seen it done. How came that fat nurse, Pepperfly, not to tell me this?"

"Mother Pepperfly don't believe in it," said Mrs. Gould. "She's as certain as I be, that no man was there."

"You might have told me this," resumed Mrs. Smith, turning to Judith. "Why, it throws more light upon the subject than all the rest put together."

"I have not had much opportunity of telling you anything," answered Judith, who had sat in her usual silent fashion, sipping the hot tea and listening to the other two. "But I don't believe it, either, for the matter of that."

"Believe what?"

"That any man was concealed on the stairs."

"But — I can't understand," cried Mrs. Smith. "Did Mr. Carlton not see one there?"

"He fancied he did at the moment. But he came to the conclusion afterwards that the moonlight had deceived him."

"And it never was followed up?"

"Oh dear yes," said Judith. "The police sought after the man for a long while, and could never find him."

"And they came to think at last, ma'am — as everybody else of sense had thought at the time — that there wasn't no man there," put in the little widow.

"Then I can tell them to the contrary," was Mrs. Smith's emphatic rejoinder. "That man was poor Mrs. Crane's husband. I happen to know so much."

Little Mrs. Gould was startled at the words. Judith arrested the piece of bread-and-butter she was about to put into her mouth, and gazed in astonishment.

"Yes," continued Mrs. Smith, "it must have been him. I know — I feel that it was him. He was at South Wennock: I know so much as that."

"You *know* this?" cried the other two in a breath.

"I do. I know that Mrs. Crane's husband was at South Wennock."

"And where is he now, ma'am?" asked the widow.

"Ah, where indeed!" was the answer, given in an angry tone. "I have never heard of him since in all these years. I came down here now to find out what I could about him — and her."

"It's what old Pepperfly told me this morning, ma'am; she said she was sure you hadn't come for nothing else. I know what I should have done in your place," added the widow. "I should have declared myself to the police the minute I come, and got them to rake up the search again. You see there was nobody here belonging to the poor lady at the time, and it made the police careless over it — leastways, a many folks have held that opinion. All I can say is, that if there was any Mr. Crane on the stairs that night, he must have stole in surreptitious down the drawing-room chimbley, for he never come in at the straight-forward door."

"There's time enough yet to declare my business to the police," was Mrs. Smith's answer. "I have preferred to remain quiet, and feel my way. Not but that one or two have suspected who I was. Judith, here, for one; she remembered me at once."

"And Mother Pepperfly for another," remarked the widow, handing up her cup for some more tea.

"No, she did not; at first she did not recollect me at all," said Mrs. Smith, as she filled it. "I think Mr. Carlton suspects who I am."

Judith lifted her eyes. "Why do you think so?"

"Because he asked so many questions when I first came — who I was, and what I was, and all the rest of it; I believe he'd have gone on asking till now if I had not put him down. And one day I caught him looking curiously into my drawers; he *said* he was searching for rag for my child's knee, but I have always thought he was looking to see what he could find."

"Why! Mr. Carlton met you that time at the station at Great Wennock!" exclaimed Mrs. Gould, the event occurring to her memory. "I remember it came out at the inquest."

"Was it Mr. Carlton I met there?" resumed Mrs. Smith, after a pause, during which she had cast her thoughts back to the nearly-forgotten incident. "I did not recognise him again. It was almost dark at the time, I remember. But perhaps his eyes were keener than mine. At any rate, I feel sure he knows who I am; why else should he put all those questions?"

"It's only natural to him to ask such," observed the Widow Gould. "He'd like it to be brought to light as well as the rest of us."

"Of course he would," was Mrs. Smith's acquiescent answer. "Once or twice I have been upon the point of talking to him about it, but I thought I'd wait; I thought I'd wait."

She spoke this in a dreamy sort of manner. Judith rose and put back her chair. She could not stay long on that day of anxiety, and she did not care to ask Mrs. Smith questions in the presence of the other.

"I say," broke in that other, "how long did that little mite of an infant live? Pepperfly says it's dead."

"Not over long," replied Mrs. Smith. "It wasn't to be expected that it would. I wish you could stay, Judith."

"I wish I could," was Judith's answer. "It's impossible to-day. There's nothing can be *done* for Lady Lucy, poor thing, but one must be in the house."

"Report says, Judy, that Lady Laura —— My goodness! who's come now?"

The sudden breaking off of the Widow Gould's remark was caused by the dashing up to the gate of some sort of vehicle. They crowded to the window to look.

It was a baker's cart. And seated in state beside the driver was Mrs. Pepperfly.

It appeared that her duties at Mrs. Knagg's were over, through that lady's being, as Mrs. Pepperfly expressed it, on her legs again, and she had quitted her the previous day. Consequently she was at leisure to make calls upon her circle of friends. It struck her that she could not do better than devote the afternoon and evening to her new acquaintance in Blister Lane, where she should be sure to enjoy a good tea,

and might happen to drop upon something nice for supper — pickled pork, or some other dainty; not to reckon the chance of being invited to take a bed. The friendly baker had accommodated her with a lift in his cart. How he had contrived to get her up, he hardly knew; still less how he should get her down again. While this was being accomplished, the Widow Gould running out to assist in the process, the little boy awoke and cried aloud. Altogether, what with one distraction and another, Judith found a good opportunity to slip away.

She was half way down the Rise, when she met Mr. Carlton driving up in his open carriage. He was on his way to pay a visit at Tupper's cottage.

CHAPTER XX.

Sir Stephen's Visit.

DOWN thundered Sir Stephen Grey as fast as the hissing and shrieking express train could take him. The message had disturbed him in no measured degree. Lucy Chesney given over! At Great Wennock he found his son waiting with a fleet horse and gig. A minute's explanation, and they were skimming along the smooth road.

"Any change since you telegraphed, Frederick?"

"None for the better, sir."

There was an interval of silence.

"My son, what a pace you are driving at? Take care what you are about."

"The horse is sure, father. And *she* lying at the turn between life and death."

Sir Stephen said no more. As the gig reached

South Wennock, and dashed through it on its way to Mr. Carlton's, the inhabitants flocked to their doors and windows. What could possess young Fred Grey, that he was driving in that mad fashion? But, as their eyes fell on his companion, they recognised him, and comprehended all. Sir Stephen Grey, the great physician, brought down from London in that haste? Then Lady Lucy Chesney must indeed be dying!

Mr. Carlton happened to be at home when the gig drew up. He had just returned from that visit to Tupper's cottage. At the first moment he did not recognise his visitor. But he did when he met him in the hall.

"Sir Stephen Grey?" he exclaimed, his manner cold, his tones bearing marked surprise. In that first moment he scarcely understood how or why Sir Stephen had come.

"How d'ye do, how d'ye do, Carlton?" uncere- moniously spoke Sir Stephen, in his haste, as he brushed past him. "Which room is she lying in?"

Whether opposition was or was not in the surgeon's mind, he did not offer it. Indeed there was no time, for Sir Stephen had gone quickly up the stairs. For one thing, Mr. Carlton was preoccupied, sundry little trifles at Tupper's cottage having put him out considerably. He comprehended the case now: that Frederick Grey — or perhaps Mr. John Grey — had telegraphed to Sir Stephen on Lucy's account. Mr. Carlton had not any objection to Sir Stephen's seeing her; but he asked himself in what way Sir Stephen's skill was better than theirs, that he need have been summoned; and he resented its having been done without consulting him.

He looked out at the front door, and saw Frederick Grey driving away in the gig, quietly now. Mr. Carlton sent after him a scornful word: he disliked him as much as he had done in the days gone by.

Sir Stephen was already at his post in Lucy's chamber, Lady Jane alone its other inmate. Mr. Carlton went in once, but Sir Stephen put his finger on his lip for silence. A few words passed between them in the lowest whisper, having reference to the case; its past symptoms and treatment; and the surgeon stole away again.

For three long hours Stephen Grey remained in the chamber, never quitting it; three long hours, and every moment of those hours might be that of death. Lady Jane caused a sandwich to be brought to the door and a glass of wine, and he swallowed the refreshment standing. And the time wore on.

When Sir Stephen quitted the house it was night. A little beyond Mr. Carlton's, nearer the town, was a space unoccupied by houses; it was dark there, for no friendly gas-lamp was near to throw out its light. Pacing this dark spot, was one with folded arms; he had so paced it since the night set in. The baronet recognised his son.

"The crisis has come," said Sir Stephen. "Come: and passed."

Frederick Grey struggled with his agitation. He strove to be a man. But he essayed twice to speak before any words would issue from his bloodless lips.

"And she is dead?"

"No. She will recover."

He placed his arm within his son's as he spoke, and walked on, perceiving little of the emotion. Sir

Stephen was of equable mind himself; he liked to take things easy, and could not understand that Frederick must be different. Frederick, however, was different: he had inherited his mother's sensitive temperament. Sir Stephen caught a glimpse of his face as they passed the window of Wilkes the barber, who had a flaring gas jet therein to display the beauties of a stuffed gentleman, all hair and whiskers, which turned round upon a pivot.

"What's the matter, Frederick? Don't you feel well?"

"Oh, yes. A little — anxious. Are you sure the crisis is favourable?"

"Certain. If she dies now, it will be from weakness. I wonder Lady Jane let her be ill at Carlton's."

Even yet Frederick was not sufficiently himself to enter on the explanation. It was not Lady Jane's fault, was all he said.

"You won't go back to-night, father?"

"No. I shall stay until morning, but I am sure she is all right now. Youth and beauty can't escape, you see. To think that it should have attacked Lucy Chesney! Fortunately she has a good constitution."

They walked on to Mr. John Grey's, where Sir Stephen would remain for the night. Most cordially was he welcomed; Mrs. Grey said it seemed like old times to see him back again.

There were many cases, even at that present time, where the fever had taken as great a hold as it had on Lucy, and when the fact of Sir Stephen's arrival became known — and the news spread like wildfire — Mr. Grey's house was besieged with applicants, praying that Sir Stephen would afford the sick the

benefit of his advice, before he went back to town. So much for popular opinion! A few years back, Mr. Stephen Grey had been hunted from the town; scarcely a soul in it would have taken his advice gratis; but Sir Stephen Grey, the orthodox London physician, the baronet, the great man who attended upon royalty, had risen to a wonderful premium. Had all the faculty of the physicians' college combined been at South Wennock, none would have been thought much of, in comparison with Sir Stephen Grey.

Did he refuse to go? Not he. At the beck and call of any in South Wennock — for he was not one to pay back evil in its own coin, Sir Stephen went abroad. In at one house, out of another, till the little hours of the morning, was he. And not a fee would he take, either from rich or poor. No, no, it was for old friendship's sake, he said, as he shook them by the hand; for old friendship's sake.

Twice in the evening he visited Lucy, and found that the favourable symptoms remained; nay, were growing more and more apparent. Jane would scarcely let go his hand; she could not divest herself of the idea that he had saved Lucy. No, Sir Stephen said: Lucy's constitution would have triumphed without him, under God.

Mr. Carlton, who had recovered his equanimity, invited Sir Stephen into his drawing-room, and seemed disposed to be cordial; but Sir Stephen told him, and with truth, that he had no time to sit that night even for a minute; South Wennock would not let him.

When Sir Stephen reached his brother's house it was one o'clock, and, to his surprise, he saw another applicant waiting for him; a stout female of extra-

ordinary size, who was dozing asleep in a chair, underneath the hall lamp. His coming in aroused her, and she stood up, curtseying after her peculiar fashion.

"You don't remember me, sir."

"Why, bless my heart! — if I don't think it's Mother Pepperfly!" he exclaimed, after a minute's doubtful stare. "What have you been doing with yourself? You have grown into two."

"Growed into six, Mr. Stephen, if I'm to be reckoned by breadth. Hope you are well, sir, and your good lady!"

"All well. And now, what do you want with me? To recommend you to a mill that grinds people slender again?"

Mrs. Pepperfly shook her head dolefully, intimating that no such mill could have any effect upon her, and proceeded to explain her business. Which she persisted in doing at full length, in spite of the lateness of the hour and Sir Stephen's fatigue.

It appeared — rather to Mrs. Pepperfly's own discomfiture — that Mrs. Smith was *not* able to invite her to a bed, owing to the only spare one being occupied by the servant maid; but she was treated to a refreshing tea and profuse supper, and enjoyed her evening very much; the Widow Gould's presence adding to the general sociability. The widow left early; she kept good hours; but Mrs. Pepperfly was in no hurry to depart. She really did make herself useful in attending to the child, and sat by him for some time after he was carried up-stairs to his room. She offered to stop with him for the night, but Mrs. Smith entirely declined: it had not come yet to sitting up nights with him.

In the course of the evening, the news which had been spreading through South Wennock reached Tupper's cottage. Mr. Carlton's boy, who had carried up some medicine, imparted it. The great London doctor, Sir Stephen Grey, had come down by telegraph to Lady Lucy, and was now paying visits to the sick throughout the town, going to cure 'em all. Mrs. Smith seized upon the news, as a parched traveller seizes upon water. She loved the child passionately, hard and cold as were her outward manners; and it seemed that this whispered a faint hope for his life. Not that she had reason to be dissatisfied with Mr. Carlton; she acknowledged that gentleman's skill, and was sure he did his best; but the very name of a great physician brings magic with it. She asked Mrs. Pepperfly to find out where Sir Stephen was staying, as she went home, and to call and beg him to step up in the morning; and to be sure and say he would be paid his fee, whatever amount it might be, lest he might think it was but a poor cottage, and decline the visit. Upon this last clause in the message the nurse laid great stress, when telling it to Sir Stephen.

But not one word did she say, or hint impart, that this Mrs. Smith was the same person who had played a part in the drama which had driven Stephen Grey from his former home. Mrs. Pepperfly was a shrewd woman; she did not want for common sense: and she judged that that past reminiscence could not be pleasant to Sir Stephen: at any rate she would not be the one to recall it to him. She simply spoke of Mrs. Smith as a "party" who had settled lately at South Wennock, and she reiterated the prayer for Sir Stephen to go up.

"But I have no time," cried Sir Stephen. "What's the matter with the boy? The fever?"

"Bless you, no, sir," replied Mrs. Pepperfly. "He haven't got enough of fever in him, poor little wan object! He's going off as fast as he can go in a decline and a white swelling in his knee."

"Then I can do no good."

"Don't say that, Mr. Stephen, sir. If you only knowed the good a doctor does, just in looking at 'em, you wouldn't say it. But in course you do know it, sir, just as well as me. He mayn't save their lives by an hour, and mostly don't in them hopeless cases; but think of the comfort it brings to the cowed-down mind! If you could step up for a minute in the morning, sir, she'd be everlasting grateful."

Telling her he must leave it until the morning to decide, though he gave a sort of promise to find the time if possible, Sir Stephen dismissed Mrs. Pepperfly. He had a good laugh afterwards with his brother John at her size. "What about the old failing?" he asked.

"Well, it's not quite cured," was the reply, "but it is certainly no worse. She keeps within bounds."

With the morning, Sir Stephen was up and out early. Many were still calling for him. Indeed everybody in the town would fain have had a visit from him, could they have invented the least shadow of an excuse, illness or no illness. His first care was Lucy Chesney, who was decidedly better: skin cool, intellects collected: in short, Lucy was out of danger.

"And now for this cottage of Tupper's, if I must go up," he exclaimed to his son, who had walked with him to Mr. Carlton's but had not entered. "I declare

it is unreasonable of people! What good can I do to a dying boy?"

One thing must be mentioned. That Frederick Grey had not the remotest idea there was any suspicion, anything singular, attaching to this woman and child. That suspicion was confined as yet to very few in South Wennock. He had casually heard such people were living in Tupper's cottage, but he supposed them to be entire strangers.

The boy was in bed up-stairs, and Mrs. Smith was putting her house to rights, for she had sent the girl for some milk. She had not expected the doctor so early. He passed quickly up the stairs; he had not a minute to lose, leaving her to follow. The little fellow, in his restlessness, had got one arm out of his night-gown sleeve, leaving it exposed. Sir Stephen's attention was caught by a mark on the arm, underneath the shoulder. He looked at it attentively; it was a very peculiar mark, a sort of mole, almost black, and as large as a speckled bean. He was talking to the child when Mrs. Smith came up.

"Is there any hope, sir?" she whispered, after Sir Stephen had examined the child and was preparing to go down.

"Not the least. He won't be here long."

Mrs. Smith paused. "At any rate, you tell it me plump enough, sir," she said presently, in a resentful tone. "There's not much soothing in that to a mother's feelings."

"Why should I not tell it you?" rejoined Sir Stephen. "You said you wished for my candid opinion, and I gave it. You are not his mother."

"Not his mother!" she echoed.

"That you are not. That child's one of mine."

"Whatever do you mean?" she exclaimed in astonishment.

"I mean that I brought that child into the world. Look here," he added, retracing his steps to the bed, and pulling aside the nightgown to show the mark. "I know the child by that, and could swear to him among a thousand."

She made no reply. They descended to the kitchen, where Frederick was waiting. Sir Stephen talked as he went down.

"The mother of that child was the unfortunate lady who died at the Widow Gould's in Palace Street some years ago: Mrs. Crane. I have cause to remember it, if nobody else has."

The widow fixed her eyes on Sir Stephen. "I asked Mrs. Pepperfly — who was the attendant nurse upon that lady — whether the infant was born with any mark upon it, and she told me it had none."

"I don't care what Mrs. Pepperfly told you," returned Sir Stephen. "She may have forgotten the mark; or may possibly not have seen it at the time, for her faculties of perception are sometimes obscured by gin. I tell you that it is the same child."

Frederick Grey was listening with all his ears, in doubt whether he might believe them. He scarcely understood. Mrs. Smith gave in the point: at least so far as that she did not dispute it further.

"You are the gentleman, sir, who attended that lady? Mr. — Mr. —"

"Mr. Stephen Grey, then: Sir Stephen, now. I am; and I am he against whom was brought the accusation of having carelessly mixed poison with her draught."

"And you did not do it?" she whispered.

"I! My good woman, what you may be to that dead lady, I know not; but you may put perfect faith in this, that I tell you. Over her poor corpse, and in the presence of her Maker and mine, I took an oath that the draught went out of my hands a proper and wholesome mixture, that no poison was impregnated with it: and I again swear it to you now, within shadow of her dying child."

"Who did do it?" continued the woman, catching up her breath.

"Nay, I know not," replied Sir Stephen, as he sat down to write a prescription with his pencil, ink not being at hand. "Smith! Smith!" he repeated to himself, the name, in connection with the past, striking upon his memory. "You must be the Mrs. Smith who came to take away the child!"

Possibly Mrs. Smith saw no further use in denying it; possibly she no longer cared to do so. "And what if I am, sir?"

"What if you are!" echoed Sir Stephen, starting off the wooden chair, and regarding her in his astonishment. "Why, my good woman, do you know that pretty nearly the whole world was searched to find you? Nobody connected with the affair was wanted so much as you were."

"What for?"

"To give what testimony you could; to throw some light upon the mystery; to declare who and what the young lady was," reiterated Sir Stephen, speaking very fast.

"But if I couldn't?" rejoined Mrs. Smith.

"But I don't suppose you couldn't. I expect you could."

"Then, sir, you expect wrong. I declare to Goodness that I know no more who the lady was — that is, what her family was or what her connections were — than that baby up-stairs knows. I have come down to South Wennock now to find out; and I never knew that Mrs. Crane was dead until after I got here."

Sir Stephen Grey was surprised. Frederick, who was leaning his elbow on the back of a high chair, carelessly played with his watch-chain.

"Where's her husband?" asked Sir Stephen, sitting down again.

"Sir, it's just what I should like to know. I have never heard of him since I took the baby from South Wennock."

"But you must know in a measure who she was! You could not have come here, as you did, to take the child from an utter stranger."

Mrs. Smith was silent. "I knew her because she lodged at my house," she said at length. "I don't know why I may not say it."

"And her husband? Was he lodging with you also?"

"No. Only herself. Sir, I declare upon my sacred word that I don't know who she really was, or who her husband, Mr. Crane, was. It's partly because I didn't want to be bothered with people asking me things I was unable to answer, that I have kept myself quiet here, saying nothing about its being the same child."

"And you did not know she was dead?"

"I did not know she was dead. I have been living with the child in Scotland, where my husband

was in a manufactory; and times upon times have we wondered what had become of Mrs. Crane, that she did not come for her child. We thought she must have gone to America with her husband. There was some talk of it."

"And you know nothing about the death? — or the circumstances attending it?" reiterated Sir Stephen.

"I know nothing whatever about it," was the reply, spoken emphatically. "Except what has been told to me since I came here this time. Mrs. Crane lodged with me in London, and left me suddenly to come to South Wennock. I got a note a day or two afterwards, saying her baby was on the point of being born, and asking me to come and fetch it. It had been arranged that I should have the nursing of it. That's all I know."

"Do you know why she came to South Wennock?"

"I believe to meet her husband. But there seemed to be some mystery connected with him, and she was not very communicative to me."

It seemed that this was all Mrs. Smith knew. At least it was all she would say; and it threw little if any more light upon the past than Sir Stephen had known before. He quitted her with a recommendation to tell what she knew to the police.

"I dare say I shall," she said. "But I must take my own time over it. I have my reasons. It won't be my fault, sir, if the thing is not brought to light."

Sir Stephen was half way down the garden with his son, when Mrs. Smith came running after him, asking him to stop.

"Sir, you have forgotten: you have not taken your fee."

"I don't take fees in South Wennock," he said with a smile. "Follow my direction, and you may give the child a little ease; but nothing can save him."

In going out at the gate they met Mr. Carlton, who was abroad early with his patients. What on earth had brought *them* there? was the question in his eyes, if not on his lips.

"You have been to see my patient!" he exclaimed aloud, in no conciliating tone.

"Is it your patient?" cried Sir Stephen. "I declare I thought it was Lycett's, and I had no time to ask extraneous particulars. I have recommended a little change in the treatment and left a prescription; just to give ease: nothing else can be done."

He spoke in the carelessly authoritative manner of a first-class physician; he meant no offence, or dreamt of any; but it grated on the ear of Mr. Carlton.

"What brought you here at all?" he asked, really wondering what could have brought Sir Stephen to that particular place.

"Mrs. Smith sent for me," said Sir Stephen. "I suppose you know what child it is?"

"What child it is?" repeated the surgeon, after an almost imperceptible pause. "It won't be long here; I know that much, in spite of physician's prescriptions."

"It is the child of that lady who died in Palace Street, where I attended for you. She who was killed by the prussic acid."

"Nonsense," said Mr. Carlton.

"There's no nonsense about it," rejoined Sir Stephen. "Mrs. Smith thought to persuade me I was wrong, but I convinced her to the contrary."

A change crossed the face of Mr. Carlton; a peculiar expression, not unlike that of a stag at bay. Lifting his eyes he caught those of Frederick Grey riveted upon his.

"Is it possible to recognise an infant after the lapse of years, do you think, Sir Stephen?"

"Not unless it is born with a distinguishing mark, as this was. I should know that boy if I met him in old age in the wilds of Africa."

"What is the mark?" asked Mr. Carlton, looking as if he doubted whether there was any.

"It's under the right arm, near the armpit; one you can't forget, once seen. Go and look at it."

They parted, shaking hands. Sir Stephen turned out at the gate, Mr. Carlton towards the door of the cottage. He had all but entered it, when he heard himself called by Sir Stephen.

"You had better make it known abroad that this is the same child, Mr. Carlton; it may lead to a discovery eventually. Perhaps Mrs. Smith will tell you more than she has told me. She says Mrs. Crane came to South Wennock to meet her husband; and I should think that likely. Recollect the fellow you saw hidden on the stairs!"

Sir Stephen had no need to say "Recollect the fellow." That fellow was in Mr. Carlton's mind, all too often for its peace.

CHAPTER XXI.

Stolen Moments.

LUCY CHESNEY was going on to convalescence — as indeed was South Wennock generally. In less than a week after Sir Stephen's visit Lucy was able to leave her bed for the sofa.

Mr. Frederick Grey considered himself a very ill-used man. Not once, save that single time when she lay in imminent danger and did not know him, had he been admitted to see Lucy. But upon hearing from his Uncle John that she was sitting up, he went down forthwith to Mr. Carlton's.

Admitted by Jonathan, asking leave and licence of nobody, he walked straight up-stairs and knocked at Lucy's chamber. "Come in," came the answer in Lucy's voice, and he went in and found her alone, lying on the sofa near the fire, dressed, and covered over with a silken coverlid.

The red flush flew into her white cheeks; but when the first moment of surprise was over, she held out her hand in token of welcome. Not a word was spoken by either. He passed his arm underneath the pillow on which she was lying and raised it up, bringing her fair young face closer to his own.

"Lucy, my whole life will be one of thankfulness!"

"Did you think I should die?"

"Yes, my darling, I did. I may tell you so, now the danger's over. Lucy, it must not be long before you are mine; I cannot risk another trial, such as this has been."

"Had I been yours ever so, you could not have guarded me from it," was her answer.

"Not from the illness; I am aware of that. But to know that you were ill — ill unto death and I not allowed to be with you — there was my trial. I do not care to tell you how badly I bore it; how I paced before the house outside, hour after hour, and night after night, watching its walls. Illness may come to you as my wife, Lucy, but it will be my right to tend you then; my right above anybody's in the world! Sisters, nurses, friends ——— what are they compared to me?"

How delightful it was to lie there! In the sweet languor of growing convalescence, pressed to that manly heart, in those protecting arms! It was almost worth having been ill for. She looked up in his face with a tender smile.

"I shall always say you saved me, Frederick."

"I saved you! How?"

"By sending for Sir Stephen. Jane declares that soon after he entered, I seemed to grow calmer. He gave me something, a powder, she says, and he changed the lotion that they were putting to my head."

"Lucy, dear, he did nothing for you that my Uncle John and Mr. Carlton were not doing. The disorder was upon the turn when he came."

"I cannot part with my opinion; neither will Jane. It is pleasant to me to think that I owe my prolonged life to your father; or rather to you for getting him here."

"Keep the opinion, then," he whispered. "And take one truth to your heart, love — that you shall

owe a very great portion of your future life's happiness to me. I will strive to make it, by God's blessing."

"Don't you think you have held me up long enough?" she presently said.

"Does it tire you? or hurt you?"

"Oh no. But you will be tired."

He raised his own face for a moment, that he might look into her eyes.

"Tired, did you say? I wish I might hold you here long enough to become tired."

Her gaze fell beneath the saucy glance that danced in his, and he bent his face to kiss away the bright blushes on her cheek. When folks get into mischief, you know, they are nearly sure to be caught. There was a brisk knock at the door, and Mr. Carlton stood before them. A far brighter blush rose then, and she would have shrunk in maidenly timidity from the arms that encircled her.

But Frederick Grey altogether declined to let her so shrink. He kept her where she was, held to him, and raised his head with calm self-possession.

"What do you do here, Mr. Carlton?"

"Do!" returned Mr. Carlton. "It is my own house."

"Your own house, of course. But this is Lady Lucy's room in it."

It seemed quite impossible for those two to meet without something unpleasant taking place between them, some little interchange of compliments indicative of incipient warfare. Frederick Grey gently laid Lucy down, and stood upright by her side, his tall form drawn to its full height.

"As my sister-in-law's medical attendant, and as her protector so long as she is underneath my roof, perhaps you will allow me to inquire what *you* do here," retorted Mr. Carlton, turning the tables. "I speak in her behalf when I say that in my opinion it is scarcely seemly."

"You will allow me to be the better judge of that," coolly returned the young man. "As my future wife, none can have a greater interest, than I, to guard her from aught unseemly."

He drew a chair near the sofa as he spoke, and sat down; an intimation that he entertained no intention of quitting the room. Lucy, her face still crimson, spoke.

"Did you want anything, Mr. Carlton?"

"I came to bring these powders, Lucy," was his reply, as he laid two small white papers on the table by her side. "You complained of heartburn this morning: take one in a wine-glass of water now, and the second later in the day; they will relieve you."

"Thank you," she replied; "I will take it presently."

Judith was in the room then, having entered in time to hear what passed. Mr. Carlton left, not choosing probably to make further demur to the presence of the intruding guest, lest it might disturb Lucy; and Frederick Grey took up the powders and examined them.

"Have you suffered from heartburn, Lucy?"

"I think so. I had a hot, disagreeable sensation in my throat this morning, and Mr. Carlton said it was heartburn. I never had it before."

He wetted his finger, put it to the powder, and

tasted what adhered to it. Then he folded up the papers and handed them to Judith.

"Put these away, Judith. They will do Lady Lucy no good."

"Am I not to take them?" inquired Lucy.

"No. I will send you a better remedy."

Judith received the powders from him very gingerly, as if she feared they might bite her, and left the room with them, meeting Lady Jane at the door, who was coming into it. Frederick laughed, and made the best excuse he could for being there without leave.

When he was leaving the house, half an hour later, Mr. Carlton came forth and met him face to face on the stairs.

"A moment, Mr. Frederick Grey, if you please. It may be well that you and I should come to an understanding. You appear to assume that you may do just as you please with me: you enter my house, you interfere in my affairs: this shall not be."

"The Ladies Chesney are temporary inmates of your house, and my visits in it are to them," was the answer. "I have not troubled it much."

"I must request you to trouble it less for the future. I am not accustomed to these underhand modes of proceeding, and I don't like them."

"Underhand!" exclaimed Frederick Grey in surprise.

"I don't choose that my patients should be tampered with. When I become incapable of taking care of them, it will be time enough for others to interfere. It was a very unwarrantable liberty, that visit of Sir Stephen Grey's to the sick boy at Tupper's cottage."

Frederick quite laughed. "You must ask Mrs. Smith to settle that with you. She sent for Sir Stephen, and I walked up with him. I did no more. I did not see the boy. As to interfering with you, Mr. Carlton, I am not conscious of having done it. I have desired Lady Lucy not to take those powders you brought her just now; so far I certainly have interfered. But you should remember in what relation she stands to me."

"And, pray, why have you desired her not to take the powders?"

"Because I don't think they are the best remedy for heartburn; I told her I would send her something else."

"You are cool and easy, sir," returned Mr. Carlton, all his old hatred to Frederick Grey rising to boiling heat. And in point of fact there was a particularly cool, indifferent sort of tone pervading Frederick Grey's behaviour towards the surgeon, which was easily discernible and anything but pleasant. "You and I will have a long account to settle some day."

"It may be as well, perhaps, that we never come to the settlement," was the answer. "I do not force it on: remember that always, Mr. Carlton, I do not force it on. There has been no good feeling between you and me for years, as you are aware; but that is no reason why we should quarrel every time we meet. I have had no intention of offending you in thus intruding into your house — and I acknowledge that it is an intrusion, antagonistic to each other as you and I are, and if you will so far allow me I would beg you in courtesy to pardon me under the circumstances. I will try and not enter it again. In a day or two

I expect the ladies will be leaving it for their own home."

He made a movement to pass as he concluded; Mr. Carlton did not oppose it, and the fray ended. But no sooner had both disappeared than Judith emerged from a store-closet hard by, in which she had been an unwilling prisoner. She came out with a pot of jam in her hand, and a scared face: anything like quarrelling was sure to startle Judith.

Lady Laura Carlton was still in her room, making believe to be yet an invalid. She liked the indulgence of recovery; the being petted with attentions and fed with good things, jellies and wines and dainty messes. She would rise towards mid-day, cause herself to be attired becomingly, go into her dressing-room, and stop there for the remainder of the day. Lady Jane had to divide her time pretty equally between Laura and Lucy, now that Lucy was getting well, for Laura was jealous and exacting.

Laura's frame of mind did not altogether tend to advance perfect recovery; at least, not if repose were essential to it. That suspicion of hers, connecting her husband with the inmates of Tupper's cottage, had only grown the fiercer in the condemned seclusion of the last week or two. On Laura Carlton's heart there was an ever-burning sense of deep humiliation. Lax allegiance in the keeping of a man's marriage vows does reflect its humiliation on the wife; and Laura drank deeply of its sting. Unduly conscious of her birth and title, of the place she held amidst the nobodies of the provincial town, remembering how impassioned had been her love for Mr. Carlton, how entirely in the early days of her wedded life she had

given this love up to him, it cannot be wondered that she felt the defalcation to her heart's core. Jealousy, rage, a thirst for redress, were ever at battle within her. She longed to fling back the humiliation on Mr. Carlton: that is, to bring him to self-humiliation. She wished to find something tangible of which to accuse him; proofs that he could neither ignore nor dispute; she cherished a vision of seeing him at her feet, suing for pardon, for reconciliation, abjectly, his head in the dust: or else that she would take a high ground, and say, I leave you, I am your wife no longer.

Not yet had Lady Jane spoken to Mr. Carlton on the subject of Clarice, or asked him whether he could or could not give her any information of the past; the surgeon's time had been so fully occupied, and her own anxiety for Lucy so great, that not a moment's opportunity had presented itself since Jane's sojourn in the house. But Jane was seeking one now. Perfect courtesy — it may indeed be said cordiality — had existed between them during Jane's stay, though from the causes mentioned they had met but little. And when they did meet it had been chiefly in Lucy's sick-room. But the time was coming on, and events were thickening.

CHAPTER XXII.

Another Shock for Mr. Carlton.

LADY LAURA sat before her dressing-room fire, leaning back in an easy chair, her feet on a low velvet ottoman to catch the warmth. Her elbows rested on the arms of the chair, the tips of her fingers were pressed together, and her eyes were bent in thought.

In point of fact the Lady Laura was buried deeply in her wrongs, real and imaginary: as was the case now three parts of her time. It was the day mentioned in the last chapter, when Mr. Frederick Grey intruded into Lucy's room; a short while subsequent to that agreeable moment in Judith's life when she had emerged from the closet, jam in hand.

Seated at the window, bearing Laura company, was Lady Jane. She was knitting a pair of the same sort of wollen mittens that she used to knit for her father. These were for Mr. Carlton. Winter weather had come on, and he had complained one day in Jane's hearing of the cold catching his wrists when he had to go abroad at night. Jane immediately offered to knit him a pair of these soft woollen things, and had set about them.

Neither to Laura, any more than to Mr. Carlton, had Jane spoken of Clarice. Laura's impatience during her sickness had prevented it: she seemed not to be in a frame of mind to hear anything serious. On this day, however, Laura was at least outwardly calm; and Jane seized upon the opportunity as she sat there. She began by telling her of the last interview with Mrs. West, and Laura listened with apathy enough, as if it were no concern of hers, until aroused by the narration of the particulars that led Mrs. West to infer Clarice must have married.

"Married!" exclaimed Laura, turning her head quickly to her sister.

"By what Mrs. West said — as I have now repeated to you — I think there can be no doubt of it. Indeed, Clarice admitted it was so when the servant girl met her."

"Oh, well, I think all that is proof enough," remarked Laura. "So it seems I was not the only one of the family to consult self-inclination — dreadful conduct as you and papa thought it in me! And pray, Jane, who was the gentleman?"

"About that there is less certainty," said Jane. "Circumstances point strongly — at least in my opinion — to its having been a brother of Mr. West's, a young medical man. He was staying there, was very intimate with Clarice, and in the following winter embarked for India. Mrs. West does not think this: she argues that Mr. Tom West was open-hearted, was his own master, and would have married Clarice publicly had he married her at all. She feels certain that they did not sail together, however it may have been; but it appears to me that Clarice could not have been in a condition of health to embark, and would probably follow him later."

"Nothing more likely. But why — being safely married — should she not have told us? Had she feared interference to prevent it, she could not have feared interference to separate them when it was done."

"True, said Lady Jane. "I have pondered it all over until I am tired and sick. At all events, this is a little clue, and now I must tell you who may possibly help us in it — Mr. Carlton."

"How should he help?" asked Laura, in surprise. "I have never spoken to him of Clarice. To confess to a sister who went out to serve as a governess and got lost, was not pleasant — and you have heard me say this before. I have never opened my lips about Clarice to Mr. Carlton. My first silence has induced my continued silence, if you can understand that."

Jane explained. That in the old days Mr. Carlton was intimate at Mrs. West's: was a friend of Tom West's, of a Mr. Crane, and of other young medical men who visited there. "It is just possible Mr. Carlton might have known something of the marriage, and of their subsequent movements," she concluded. Laura did not acquiesce.

"Really, Jane, there seems very little use in bringing up this uncertainty about Clarice," she fretfully exclaimed. "As I say, it does not tell for the dignity of the Chesney family."

"I will not rest, now, until I have found out Clarice — if she is to be found," replied Jane, in some agitation. "This information of Mrs. West's has given me an impetus; and my father left her to me. She may yet be living; may be in poverty, for all we know, and unwilling to apply to us; or," she added, dropping her voice, "or if dead herself, she may have left a child or children. I *must* inquire of Mr. Carlton, Laura, in spite of your prejudices and your pride."

"Inquire if you like," returned Laura ungraciously. "You always seem to speak as if there were some dark mystery attaching to this business, apart from the bare loss of Clarice," she continued, in a condemning sort of way.

"It invariably presents itself as a mystery to my own mind," said Jane, and her tone certainly did sound dark enough as she spoke; "a mystery which I seem to shrink from. You know that little lame boy at Tupper's cottage?"

"Well?" returned Laura, after a pause and a stare.

"I cannot divest myself of the idea that that child is Clarice's."

Up started Lady Laura. Flinging from her knees a warm covering which had been laid on them, she stamped up and down the room in excitement, forgetting her character of invalid.

"That child Clarice's! For shame, Jane! That child is — is — yes, I *will* speak out! That child is Mr. Carlton's."

Jane sat, unable to speak, aghast at her vehemence; at her words.

"Mr. Carlton's! Nay, Laura, I think it is you who should cry shame. What wild notion can have taken possession of you?"

Laura, ten times more vehement, more excited than before, reiterated her assertion. She was in the midst of her tirade — directed against Mr. Carlton and mankind in general — when Judith came in. Laura, uncontrollable as ever her father was when over-mastered by passion, seized the girl by the arm.

"You know that child at Tupper's cottage, Judith? I have heard of Lady Jane sending you there. Who is he like?"

Judith stood in dismay. She tried to parry the question. Lady Laura shook her by the arm.

"My lady, it's well known there's no accounting for likenesses: two people that never were within miles of each other in their lives may be alike."

"Of course they may be," sarcastically retorted Lady Laura. "*Will* you speak, Judith?"

"And sometimes are," interposed Jane, with calm composure. "A likeness alone proves nothing. But you had better speak at once, Judith."

"My ladies, the likeness I saw could be nothing but an accidental one," said Judith, still avoiding a direct answer. "It may exist in my fancy only."

Laura stamped her foot. "You must speak, Judith," said Lady Jane. "Like whom do you think the child?"

"Like Mr. Carlton," was the low reply.

Lady Jane stood dumb. It was anything but the answer she expected, for she had believed Laura's notion to be pure fancy. A triumphant glance shot from Laura's eyes, and certain ill-advised words dropped from her lips. The avowal seemed so complete a confirmation of her suspicions, that she looked upon the case as proved against Mr. Carlton.

She sat down in her chair again, battling with the jealous anger that was causing her bosom to heave and throb tumultuously. Jane repudiated the idea, repudiated it utterly, whatever accidental resemblance might exist to Mr. Carlton. She turned to Judith. As so much had been spoken before the girl, it was well that more should be said.

"We had a sister who was lost, Judith — you once heard me allude to her before. She has never been heard of; but latterly I have gathered facts which induce me to conclude that she married. In that little child at Tupper's cottage I trace a very great likeness to her, and I cannot divest myself of the idea that it must be her child. Laura don't *you* see how feasible it is? Clarice may have gone abroad with her husband, leaving her child behind at nurse."

For once a tinge of colour came into the white face of Judith. "*What* name did you say, my lady? *Clarice?*"

"Clarice," repeated Jane in surprise, for the emphasis was involuntary. "Lady Clarice. Why?"

Judith turned away. "Oh, nothing, my lady; nothing. I thought the name very uncommon."

"It is rather uncommon. We have some reason to think she married a Mr. West: a gentleman who afterwards went abroad and died. What are you looking at, Judith?"

The girl had turned round again, in open genuine surprise this time. "I once knew a Mr. West, my lady; a gentleman who was visiting old Mrs. Jenkinson in Palace Street, where my sister lives. He was Mrs. Jenkinson's nephew."

"Was his name Thomas?" asked Jane, eagerly.

"I don't know, my lady. I can't remember. Margaret could tell."

"And what was he? In any profession?"

Judith shook her head. Margaret knew, no doubt, she said: she would inquire of her, if her lady pleased.

Her lady did please, and told her to do so. But Lady Jane did not think much of this: West was rather a common name.

On this same afternoon at dusk, Mr. Carlton was in his surgery alone, preparing some mixture for Lucy — for the medicines necessary for her had been supplied by him, not by Mr. Grey. It grew too dark to see the proportions with any exactness, and he lighted one of the gas-burners. The flame went flaring up, and Mr. Carlton turned to the narrow counter again, which was close under the window, and took a bottle in his hand.

Reader, when your room has been lighted up, and the window left exposed, have you ever felt a dread, a horror of what you might witness there? — Of seeing something unearthly, or what you may fear as such, standing outside the glass, and peering in? I believe that it is a sensation which has been experienced by

many, causing them to drag down the blind, or to order the shutters closed with all speed. Was it this feeling which induced Mr. Carlton to look up from his employment, full at the window before him? or was his mind guided by subtle instinct, whispering that somebody was there?

The face, but imperfectly seen, was pressed against the glass, in the pane immediately facing him: that dread face, with its white skin and its black whiskers, and the dark handkerchief round its chin, dreadful to the reminiscence of Mr. Carlton. It appeared to be eagerly watching, not him, but his movements, as he made up the medicine.

Mr. Carlton, impassive Mr. Carlton, found that he had nerves for once in his life. He cried aloud in the moment's impulse; a wild sort of cry, not unlike that of a sea-gull, and the glass jar dropped from his hand on the floor and was shivered into fragments. Mr. Jefferson rushed in to see his principal staring at the surgery window, and all the good syrup of *Taraxacum* spilled.

CHAPTER XXIII.

Miss Stiffing's Expedition.

DECEMBER came in. On a cold, bitter evening, a night or two subsequent to the above, a young woman might have been seen scudding through the streets of South Wennock. She wore a warm cloak, and kept her black Shetland veil tight over her face to protect it, for the wind was howling and the sleet was beating. It was Miss Stiffing, the maid of Lady Laura Carlton.

"Such a freak of my lady's!" she grumbled discontentedly, as she went along. "Sending one abroad in this pelting weather! But that's just like her; she takes a thing into her head, and then it must be done off-hand, convenient or inconvenient. Bother take the big cupboard! What did she go and lose the key for, if she wants it undone?"

She reached a locksmith's shop and turned short into it. It was only lighted by a solitary candle, and that was placed so as to afford little light beyond the counter. Consequently the maid stumbled over some fire-irons that stood out slanting from the wall; they came down on the run, and she nearly with them.

"Now then! what the plague, White, can't you keep the shop free for folks to enter?" she testily exclaimed, whilst the unoffending locksmith hastened round, and meekly picked up his property.

"Is it you, Miss Stiffing? And how are you, ma'am?"

"Why, I'm as cranky as them there bell rests of yours, that's what I am," returned Miss Stiffing. "She have no more consideration than an owl, haven't my lady. Fancy her sending me slopping in my thin shoes through the beastly streets to-night!"

"Couldn't you have put on boots?" asked the blacksmith, sensibly.

"No, I couldn't. There! When one's dressed for the evening one doesn't want to be bothered changing shoes and boots. And you, White! why don't you have gas in your shop, like other christians?"

"I can't afford it, Miss Stiffing. And I mostly work in the back room by candle-light; the shop's so precious cold in winter. What can I do for you, miss?"

"I want a skeleton key."

"A skeleton key!" repeated the tradesman.

"Yes, a skeleton key. Is there anything so odd is that? If I had said a skeleton, you might have stared."

"What is it for?" he asked, scratching his head, and trying to remember whether the law allowed skeleton keys to be handed over indiscriminately to servants.

"Well, it's for my lady, if you must come to the bottom of everything. She goes and loses the key of the big cupboard, that stands in the recess by her bedroom door. 'Where's the key of that cupboard?' says she to me, this afternoon. 'My lady, it's in the keyhole,' says I, 'It's not,' says she; 'you just go and find it.' Well, upon that I call to mind that I had put the key into her key-drawer only yesterday morning, and I told her so, but it can't be found. Of course she has gone herself and lost it."

"I daresay it's only mislaid," remarked the man.

"Nothing else in the world; dropped down, perhaps, behind the furniture, or something of that, and will be found in the morning. I said so to my lady; but no, not a minute's waiting will do for her. She must have the door opened to-night, and off she sends me here for a skeleton key. 'I won't have the lock picked or damaged, in case the key does turn up,' says she. 'Tell White to send me a skeleton key, one that'll pick any lock of about that size, and he shall have it returned in a day or two.' And so off I came. And now, just look sharp, for I'd like to get back home to the fire."

"I'd have sent one of the men-servants."

"I dare say you would; but you don't live under Lady Laura Carlton. If I told another servant to go when she had sent me, I might pack up my boxes. Is this the article? It looks simple enough."

"It's simple enough, miss," said the man, as he proceeded to explain its use. "And it's good night, and wishing you a pleasanter walk back again, Miss Stiffing."

"Which you must be an idiot to wish," irascibly returned Miss Stiffing. "Is the sleet and rain not falling incessant, to make it beastlier instead of pleasanter!"

The young woman made her way home as speedily as circumstances and her shoes permitted. Lady Laura Carlton was waiting for her in her dressing-room; waiting impatiently, as might be seen. What project was in her mind that night, flushing her cheeks to emotion, and rendering her eyes restless? Could it be that these external signs of agitation were caused by the simple mislaying of a key? — and the key of a place that was not in particular request?

"What a time you have been, Stiffing!" she exclaimed, as the maid entered.

"Time, my lady!" returned Stiffing, whose manner and voice, be it remarked, were subdued to meekness in Lady Laura's presence, whatever they might be out of it. "I went as quick as the sleet and the slush allowed me; and this is what White has sent. Shall I open the place now, my lady?"

"No," sharply answered Lady Laura. "It is time for my port-wine jelly."

Stiffing went down-stairs, muttering something about caprice, and brought up a small mould of dark

jelly on a handsome glass dish, a glass plate and a tea-spoon. As she was putting the things on the sofa table before her mistress, Lady Laura looked at her.

"I cannot think how you could have been so carelessly stupid as to lose the key!"

"All I can say is this, my lady, that I put it into that there key-drawer yesterday morning. I am as positive of it —"

"There, that will do, Stiffing," interrupted Lady Laura; "it is of no use going over the old assertion again. You can go down, and get warm after your walk. I shall not want you for at least an hour. When I do, I'll ring. And, Stiffing, you will not forget the injunction I gave you — to hold your tongue. I won't have the servants know that I admit skeleton keys into my house: it might teach some of them tricks."

Stiffing departed, saying she would remember: and she meant to keep her word. With all Lady Laura's exactions and caprice, she was a generous mistress, and the servants liked her. Stiffing made herself comfortable in the servants' sitting-room before a blazing fire. They seemed curious to know what had taken her out: "O, only a little errand for my lady," was the indifferent answer. They were all shut up snugly enough there, and Judith was among them. Lady Jane was with Lucy, and Mr. Carlton had gone out.

The stairs were creaking — as stairs *will* creak when a stealthy footstep is upon them, and the house in silence. They were the back stairs, not the front; and, cautiously descending them, a thick black silk scarf tied over her head, and a shawl muffled round her, to guard against cold, was Lady Laura Carlton, bearing the skeleton key. The stairs were dark, for

those back stairs were never lighted, and she felt her way by the balustrades. They brought her in time to the cellar; she groped her way through it, entered the room beyond, and struck a light. She struck the wax match and lighted the taper she had brought down from her writing-table. Laura! Laura Carlton! what are you about to do? To pry into your husband's private affairs, into things which he deems it fit and right to keep from you? Take you care; secrets, sought out dishonourably, rarely benefit the seeker.

She was not in a mood to take care. Had a very angel from heaven appeared to warn her against what she was doing, she had scarcely heeded it. In her present state of exasperation she cared not what the result might be. What precise secrets, or mementos of secrets, Mr. Carlton kept in that iron safe before her, she knew not; her suspicions were entirely vague; but the idea had taken possession of her that something or other might be ferreted out of it, and it was only her illness which had caused her to delay the search so long. The doubt arose simply from that trifling act of Mr. Carlton — the shutting-to hastily of the safe-door the day Laura penetrated to the cellar. From that hour she had determined to open it. Not that she supposed the contents of the iron safe would help her in the particular suspicion she had taken up latterly: not at all. Though there was little doubt that the unwilling avowal regarding the likeness, drawn recently from Judith, had contributed its quota to work her mind up to its present excited state of rebellion.

Is it not remarkable to trace the chain of events, so trivial in themselves, by which the detection of

crime is sometimes worked out? — Twelve months before, an accidental circumstance had made Laura Carlton familiar with the use of a skeleton key: she attached no importance to the knowledge: how should she? and yet, but for that, she might never have succeeded in opening that safe in her husband's cellar.

She did open it now: readily; and she put the taper, in its elegant glass holder, to stand inside, while her eyes ranged over its contents. There were two shelves: the upper one appeared to be entirely filled with chemical apparatus, and the lower one partially.

Near to her hand there was a cash-box, locked; and there was a small note-case, not locked, for a very good reason — there was no lock on it.

Lady Laura took up the cash-box, rather a large one, and shook it: if it contained money, it must have been bank notes, for neither gold nor silver rattled. She put it down again, and opened the note-case. To describe her disappointment when she found it contained what she emphatically termed "rubbish," would be difficult. There were scraps of writing, Latin and Greek: there were some receipted bills of a by-gone date; there were various private memoranda, not of a nature to bear upon her jealous fears; there were two or three prescriptions bearing the names of celebrated physicians; there was a receipt for the compounding of "sherbet," and another for walnut catsup. In short, by the cursory glance afforded to Lady Laura in her haste, it appeared to contain neither more nor less than worthless scraps of paper.

She was closing it with a petulant gesture, when

her eye fell upon an opening in the leather, and she found there was a pocket. Pulling it apart with both her hands, a note lay disclosed, nothing else, and she took it out.

"Lewis Carlton, Esq.," was the address, and Lady Laura thrust it into her pocket for private perusal at her leisure: but a sudden recollection flashed upon her, and she took it out again, to devour the address with her eyes. If ever she had seen the hand-writing of her sister Clarice, she thought she saw it then. But there was not time to satisfy herself, for she stood upon thorns, metaphorically speaking, and she returned it to her pocket.

She placed the note-case in its former position; she took the taper in her hand and held it so that its rays fell on the top shelf, but nothing was really there, save what concerned his profession; nothing else was on the lower shelf, save the cash-box, and some bundles of receipted bills. Lady Laura was thinking how much she should like to see the inside of the cash-box, when Mr. Carlton's voice on the stairs startled her.

Startled her pretty nearly into fits. What she did, in her terror, she scarcely knew. He was evidently coming down, but had halted momentarily to call out some order to one of the servants in the distance, or to the surgery boy. Instinct caused Lady Laura to gaze round for a hiding-place, and she espied a barrel in a corner. She blew out the light, grasped the crystal candlestick and the skeleton key, pushed-to the safe-door firmly, and crouched down between the barrel and the wall, her heart beating as it had never yet beat in all her life.

She would almost rather die than that he should discover her; for although she had not shrunk from committing the act, to be detected during its actual perpetration would be more than her pride could well endure. Laura was honourable by nature; yes, she was, however you may feel inclined to demur to the assertion, seeing what you do see. She hated meanness as much as ever did the late earl; and to be detected at *this*, to be caught in its actual perpetration, would be a blow to her self-esteem for ever. In that moment there flashed a faint view on her mind of the wrong she was committing, of how utterly unjustifiable it was, how despicable its nature.

Mr. Carlton came in, a candle in his hand. Drawing from his pocket a bunch of keys, he inserted one in the lock. But he found the lock was not fastened.

"Why — what the deuce!" he uttered, half aloud and in a careless tone, "did *I* leave it so?"

And then, as if a suspicion occurred to him, he turned and peered round the room. His wife could see it, and she felt sick nearly unto death, lest he should discern her.

But she cowered in the shade of the dark corner; moreover the clothes she wore were dark, and his eye passed her over. He next turned his attention to the lock, but could find nothing the matter with it. He then applied himself to the object which he had come for, which appeared to be his chemical apparatus, for he began moving the different things about on the top shelf, in order to get at a glass cylinder.

He held it in his hand, when the voice of his assistant was heard, speaking down the stairs.

"Are you there, Mr. Carlton?"

"Yes," responded the surgeon. "Anything wanted?"

"That child at Tupper's cottage is taken worse; dying, they think."

"And the sooner it dies the better," was Mr. Carlton's rejoinder to himself, in a voice of pity. "I can't do it any good, poor little fellow, or ease its pain. — Who has come?" he called aloud.

"Only a neighbour," replied Mr. Jefferson. "Perhaps you would like to hear what she says."

"Coming," said Mr. Carlton.

"He put down the cylinder, left the safe-door open, and went up-stairs; intending, no doubt, to be back in a twinkling. As his footsteps died away, Lady Laura sprang from her hiding-place, and winged her flight up the stairs. She succeeded in gaining the top of the cellar stairs, and she noiselessly stole round a corner which would take her to the others. A few paces from her was the surgery door, and she heard voices inside. At a time of less terror, she might have stopped to listen, hearing where the messenger came from; but her own safety was above every consideration now, even above her jealous surmises. Arrived in her room, she sat there panting, not knowing whether she should faint or not.

She took some of the port-wine jelly, which still remained on the table, and leaned back in her easy chair to rest. After a while, it must have been nearly half an hour, when her heart had ceased to beat so violently, she rose from her chair, felt in her pocket, and drew something out of it.

It was the missing key, the key of the cupboard: had it been snugly reposing there all the time? What would Miss Stiffing have said? Lady Laura calmly

unlocked the cupboard, leaving the door open, and then carried the key into her bedroom, and dropped it in a quiet nook on the floor, close to the key-drawer, where Miss Stiffing's eyes would be charmed with its sight the first thing in the morning.

She sat down to the fire again, and opened the note, the note whose superscription was in the handwriting of her sister Clarice. But ere she had well glanced at its contents she was interrupted by the sudden entrance of Lady Jane.

"Lucy has got nicely to sleep," said Jane, "and I think I shall go to bed. You do not want me this evening, Laura?"

"I don't want you," returned Laura, impatiently, wishing Jane had not disturbed her before her curiosity was satisfied. "What do you want to go to bed at ten o'clock for? It's not ten yet."

"I am feeling so very tired. My head aches, too. Now that I am at ease as to Lucy, I begin to feel the fatigue and anxiety of the past week or two. Good night, Laura."

"Good night," carelessly returned Laura, in a fever of impatience to get to her letter. "I shall be going to bed myself."

But Jane had scarcely gone out when Mr. Carlton came in, and Laura had to crush the stolen goods into her pocket again.

He sat down wearily, opposite Laura. He had been very busy all day, and had now come from a hasty run to Tupper's cottage.

"How do you feel to-night, Laura?"

"Oh, pretty well," was Laura's answer; and the consciousness of the fraud she had been committing on

him made her rather more civil than she had been of late. "You seem tired, Lewis."

"Tired to weariness," responded Mr. Carlton. "People are all getting better; but I'm sure it hardly looks like it, for they have been more exacting to-day than when they were in danger."

"You were not home to dinner, were you?"

"No; I am going to take something now. Should you not be in bed, Laura?"

"I don't know; I think I am tired of bed," she answered fretfully. "I shall go presently."

He laughed pleasantly. "You are tired with having too little to do, I with having too much. Laura, I think we both want a change. It shall not be long now before we leave South Wennock."

He sat a few minutes longer, and then went downstairs. Laura once more brought forth her letter, and took the precaution to slip the bolt of the door.

"Perhaps I shall be at peace now!" she cried, in a resentful tone.

In peace to read it, so far; but certainly not in peace afterwards; for the contents puzzled her to torment. She turned it about, she read it twice, she studied the superscription, she compared it with the lines themselves: at first to no purpose.

And finally she came to the conclusion that the letter was not written to Mr. Carlton, although addressed to him, but to Mr. Tom West. And that Mr. Tom West had married Clarice.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A Little Light.

LADY JANE CHESNEY sat before her dressing-glass, having her hair brushed by Judith, preparatory to retiring to rest, when they were interrupted by the entrance of Lady Laura.

"Jane, I want a little talk with you," she said, sitting down by the bright fire. "Bring your chair round to the warmth."

"I thought you said you were going to bed," observed Jane.

"I don't feel tired. Excitement is as good to me as rest, and I have had an exciting evening, taking one thing with another. Jane, you were right about Clarice."

"Right in what way?" returned Jane, eagerly. "Have you questioned Mr. Carlton?"

"Shall I leave the room, my lady, and come back presently?" inquired Judith of her mistress, pausing with the hair-brush in her hand.

"No," interposed Lady Laura. "There's something to puzzle out, and I think you may perhaps help us, Judith. I have not questioned Mr. Carlton, Jane, but in — in —" Laura gave a slight cough, as though her throat troubled her — "in rummaging over some of his waste places to-night, I came upon a note. A note written by Clarice."

Involuntarily Jane thought of the scrap of paper, the part of a note written by Clarice, which Laura had "come upon" once before.

"It is written to her husband," continued Laura. "That Tom West, I suppose. And it proves that she

came to South Wennock, and that Mr. Carlton must have attended upon her. Only think, Jane, to South Wennock! She must have been visiting at Mrs. Jenkinson's, I fancy, where Judith's sister lives, for the note is dated from Palace Street. I will read it to you, Jane."

"13, Palace Street, South Wennock.

"Friday Evening, March 10, 1848.

"MY DEAREST HUSBAND, — You will be surprised to hear of my journey, and that I am safe at South Wennock. I know you will be angry, but I cannot help it, and we will talk over things when we meet. I have asked the people here about a medical man, and they strongly recommend one of the Messrs. Grey, but I tell them I would prefer Mr. Carlton: what do you say? I must ask him to come and see me this evening, for the railway omnibus shook me dreadfully, and I feel anything but well. *I know he will come, and without delay.*

"It was unreasonable of you, my darling husband, to wish me to lie ill so far away. I felt that I could not; that I should have died; and that's why I have disobeyed you. I can go back again when all's well over, if things still turn out crossly for the avowal of our marriage. No harm can come of it, for I have not given our name, and you must ask for me by the one you and Mr. West were so fond of calling me in sport.

"Lose no time; be here in half an hour if you can, for I do feel really ill; and believe me,

"Ever your loving wife,
"CLARICE."

"I have heard part of that note before!" was on the tip of Judith's tongue. But some feeling prompted her to stop the words ere they were spoken. Lady Jane took the note and read it to herself in silence, pondering over each word.

"It is incomprehensible to me," she at length said, drawing the envelope from Laura, and looking at it. "Why, this is addressed to Mr. Carlton!" she burst forth.

"It must have come into his possession in some way; perhaps he and Tom West got their envelopes and letters mixed together," returned Laura with composure. "I suppose there's no doubt now that it was Tom West she married. Judith says he used to visit his aunt in Palace Street — old Mrs. Jenkinson, — and the letter's dated from thence. If — Judith, what on earth's the matter with you?"

"Thank you, my lady," replied Judith, who was looking white and faint. "I feel a little sick. It will pass off directly."

"It is evident that Clarice must have come to South Wennock without her husband's consent," resumed Laura, tossing a bottle of smelling salts to Judith. "I suppose he was stopping at Mrs. Jenkinson's. Her number is thirteen, is it not, Judith?"

"No, my lady, Mrs. Jenkinson's number is fourteen," replied Judith, in a low tone.

"Oh, well, a mistake's readily made in a strange number. Clarice must have —"

"Laura, I am all at sea," interrupted Lady Jane. "Why should Clarice have come to South Wennock at all, unless she came with him? This note would seem to imply that he lived at South Wennock, but — he never lived here, did he, Judith?"

"Who, my lady? Mr. West? no, he never lived here," was Judith's reply; but the girl looked remarkably uneasy. Did she fear being asked questions which she could not answer?

"It could not have been Tom West that Clarice married," said Jane. "This note is dated March, and he sailed for India in February."

"My ladies," spoke up Judith, "I have inquired of my sister Margaret whether young Mr. West's name was Thomas. She says it was not Thomas, but Robert; and she also says he was married several years ago to a Miss Pope, and they live somewhere in Gloucestershire."

"Then that disposes of the affair, so far as he is concerned," cried Laura, with wondering eyes. "How much difficulty it appears to be encompassed with!"

"Not quite," said Jane. "Robert West may have been a brother. Do you know, Judith? And do you know whether Robert was a surgeon?"

"Robert West was not in any profession, my lady. He was an independent gentleman. I don't think he had a brother. Margaret says he had not."

"Laura, I cannot rest," said Jane, starting from a pause of thought. "I shall go now and speak to Mr. Carlton. I ought to have applied to him before."

Causing her hair to be smoothed under one of her plain white net morning caps, Jane proceeded to the dining-parlour. Mr. Carlton was in an easy-chair before the fire, solacing himself with a cigar, which, as a visiting medical man, he only ventured on at night — and that not often. He threw it into the fire, with a word of apology, when he saw Lady Jane.

"Pardon me for disturbing you at this hour," she said, taking the chair he offered, "but I am in great want of some information which I think you can afford me — very anxious about it, in short. Some years ago you were, I believe, intimate with a family living in Gloucester Terrace, Hyde Park, of the name of West. Can you tell me whether Tom West married my sister?"

No pen could adequately describe Mr. Carlton's countenance. It was one sheet of blank consternation; first — as it appeared — at being charged with having known the Wests, next at being questioned about Lady Jane's sister.

"I can't tell anything about it," he said at length, with the air of a man bewildered.

"I hope you can, Mr. Carlton. Perhaps I have not been sufficiently explicit. You were a friend of Tom West's, were you not?"

"I certainly knew him," he replied, after a pause. "Not much; that is, it was but a passing acquaintance. He went out to India, and I believe died there."

"Not much!" repeated Jane; "Mrs. West told me you were there frequently. You used to see her cousins there, and my sister. We have a suspicion that my sister married Thomas West. Were you cognisant of it?"

The same blank look reigned paramount in Mr. Carlton's face.

"I really do not understand you, Lady Jane. I never saw a sister of yours at Mrs. West's. What sister?"

"You saw Miss Beauchamp?"

He suddenly rose, and seizing hold of the poker, began knocking the fire about.

"Well?" said he.

"I speak of Miss Beauchamp. She was my sister."

He turned sharply round, poker in hand.

"Miss Beauchamp! What farce is it that you wish to play me, Lady Jane?"

"No farce," replied Jane, sadly. "She dropped our name when she went out as governess — not to disgrace it, she said — retaining only that of Beauchamp. She was our sister, Clarice Beauchamp Chesney."

A strange expression was on Mr. Carlton's face, but he kept it turned away from Lady Jane.

"We know that Clarice married," proceeded Jane. "and we can only think she must have married Thomas West. Had he a brother Robert, do you know?"

"Had who a brother Robert?" asked Mr. Carlton.

"Tom West."

"Tom West had no brother Robert, that I am aware of. I never knew any one of the name of Robert West."

"What name did my sister go by when she was here, at South Wennock?" continued Jane. "You can tell that."

"She never was at South Wennock."

"Mr. Carlton! She was, and you must know it. She sent for you, did she not, to attend her the night she arrived: sent for you to Palace Street?"

Down clattered the poker. Was it an accident, or were Mr. Carlton's hands shaking? As he stooped to pick it up, Jane caught a glimpse of his face: either it was unusually pale or the firelight deceived her.

Another moment, and he had put the poker in its place, and was turning to Lady Jane and speaking quietly.

"I know nothing of your sister; nothing whatever. Why should you think I do? — why do you apply to me?"

The precise why and wherefore Jane could not answer, for she had given a hasty promise to Laura not to speak of the note the latter had produced.

"When my sister came to South Wennock to stay with old Mrs. Jenkinson, we have reason to believe that you attended her, Mr. Carlton. I want to know by what name she then went."

Again astonishment appeared to be the prevailing emotion of Mr. Carlton. It seemed that he could not understand.

"I protest, Lady Jane, you are asking me things that I know nothing of. I never was inside Mrs. Jenkinson's house in my life. John Grey attends there."

"Clarice would not have the Greys; Clarice preferred you: and Clarice was there. Was she not confined in Palace Street?"

Mr. Carlton raised his hand to smoothe his brow. "What mistake you are labouring under, I cannot tell," he presently said. "I know nothing of what you are asking me; I know nothing of your sister, or her health, or her movements; and I know as little of Mrs. Jenkinson."

"You knew Miss Beauchamp at Mrs. West's?" rejoined Jane.

"I used to see a lady there of that name, I remember, the Wests' governess," he replied. "Surely,

Lady Jane, you must make some strange mistake in calling her your sister?"

"She was indeed our sister, Mr. Carlton. Laura, it seems, has never liked to mention the subject of Clarice to you, but we have been searching for her all these years."

"Why has she not liked to mention it?" interrupted Mr. Carlton.

"From a feeling of pride, in the first instance, I believe: later, her original silence has kept her silent. But — can you not tell me something, Mr. Carlton? Did Clarice marry Tom West?"

"Lady Jane, I cannot tell you anything, he repeated, some annoyance in his tone. "Miss Beauchamp was the Wests' governess, she was not mine. All I can say is, that if she married Tom West, I never knew it. So far as I believe, Tom West went out to India a single man. When I came down here to settle, I lost sight of them all."

"But — surely you can tell me something?" Jane persisted, collecting her senses, which seemed in a maze. "Did you not attend my sister here, at Mrs. Jenkinson's? You were certainly summoned to do so."

"What grounds have you for thinking so? By whom was I summoned?"

Jane's tongue was again tied. She could not tell of the note she had just read.

"The best answer I can give you, Lady Jane, is but a repetition of what I have already said," he resumed, finding she did not speak. "I never attended any one at Mrs. Jenkinson's in my life: I never was summoned to do so."

"And you can tell me nothing?"

"I cannot indeed."

Jane rose from her chair, dissatisfied. "Will you pardon me for saying, Mr. Carlton, that I think you could say more if you would. I *must* find my sister, alive or dead. A curious suspicion has been latterly upon me that that little boy at Tupper's cottage is her child," she continued, in agitation. "I wish you could help me."

He shook his head, intimating that he could not, opened the door for Lady Jane, and bowed her out. Laura, waiting in Jane's room still, questioned her when she got up-stairs.

"Well?" said she.

"Mr. Carlton either does not know anything, or will not disclose it," said Jane. "I think it is the latter."

"Did he ever know Clarice?"

"As Miss Beauchamp; not as Clarice Chesney. I believe he spoke truth there. He seems to have a difficulty in believing still that she was our sister. He says he never was inside Mrs. Jenkinson's house in his life. Laura, I should have shown the note: I could have questioned to so much more purpose."

"Ah, but that would not do at any price," laughed Laura. "I got it out of one of his hiding-places."

"How can you laugh at this moment?" rebuked Jane. "I feel as if some heavy secret were on the point of discovery. You need not go away, Judith."

Laura opened her eyes. "What secret?"

"How can I tell? I wish I could tell. If it were all straight and fair, why should Mr. Carlton betray agitation, and refuse to answer? There's no doubt my questions did agitate him. A horrible doubt is grow-

ing upon me, Laura: whether those young Wests can have deceived Clarice into a marriage which would not, or did not, hold good — and Mr. Carlton was the confidant of their plans!”

“Do you suppose Mr. Carlton would sully himself by anything so cruel and disgraceful?” flashed Laura. “He has his own faults; but he would not lend himself to a business of that sort.”

“Men think a poor friendless governess legitimate game sometimes,” spoke Jane in a low tone. “And she was only known as the unprotected girl, Clarice Beauchamp. Rely upon it, Tom West worked ill to Clarice in some shape or other; I fear Mr. Carlton knew of it, and is trying to screen him. It was so shadowed forth in that dreadful dream: Mr. Carlton was mixed up with it.”

“What was that dream, Jane? — tell it me now,” whispered Laura, eagerly; for, however it might have pleased Laura in general to ridicule not only dreams themselves, but those who dreamt them, that night hour, and the vague dread pervading Jane’s spirit, were all too plainly exercising their influence over her now. Jane began at once; it was a significant fact that she showed no thought of objecting. Judith, not caring to be solitary at a dream-telling, drew near and stood close behind the chair of Lady Jane.

“It was on Monday night, the thirteenth of March,” began Lady Jane, with a shiver, “and quite the beginning of Lent, for Easter was very late that year —”

“What has Easter to do with it?” interrupted Laura.

“Nothing. I had gone to bed that evening as soon as tea was over, not being well, and by half-past nine

was asleep. I thought that Clarice came to my bedside, dressed in her grave clothes, and stood looking at me. Understand me, Laura — I remembered in my dream that I had gone to bed ill; I seemed to know that I was lying in bed, and that I was sleeping. I dreamt that Clarice came, I say, and I dreamt that I awoke; her attire, the shroud, did not appear to frighten me, but she did not speak. 'Why have you come here?' I asked. 'To tell you that I am gone,' she answered, and she pointed to her face, which was that of the dead, and to the shroud; but it did not appear that I associated her words with death (at least, I could not remember so when I awoke), but that she had gone on a journey. 'Why did you go without telling us?' I asked her. 'He stopped it,' she answered, 'he was too quick.' 'Who?' I asked: and she turned her white face round and pointed to the door of the room. I cannot describe to you, Laura, the horror, the fear, that at that moment seemed to take possession of me. 'Come and see him,' Clarice said, and glided towards the door. I seemed to get out of bed, to follow her, without power of resistance; she kept looking over her shoulder, with her dead face and her dead fixed eyes, and beckoned to me. But oh! the dread, the fear I seemed to experience at having to look beyond that door! It was a dread perfectly unearthly, such as we can never feel in life. I thought Clarice went out before me — went out in obedience to one who was compelling her to go, as she was compelling me. It seemed that I would have given my own life not to look, but yet I had no thought of resistance. There, standing outside, and waiting for her, was —"

"A—h!" shrieked Laura, her nerves strung beyond their tension with the superstitious terror induced by the recital. "Look at Judith!"

Jane started at the interruption, and turned round. Judith's face was of a blue whiteness. She stammered forth an excuse.

"I am not ill, my ladies; but it frightens me to hear these strange dreams."

Lady Jane resumed.

"Standing outside, waiting for Clarice, was the person she seemed to have spoken of as stopping her from telling us, as being 'too quick.' It was Mr. Carlton. He was looking at her sternly, and pointing with his outstretched hand to some place in the distance where it was dark. I remember no more; I awoke with the terror, the horror — such horror that, I tell you, Laura, we can never experience in life, except in a dream. And yet I was collected enough not to scream; papa was just getting better from his attack of gout, and I did not dare raise the house, and alarm him. I put my head under the bedclothes, and I believe a full hour passed before I had courage to put it out again; there I lay, shivering and shaking, bathed in perspiration."

"It was a singular dream," said Laura, musingly. "But, Jane, it could have had no meaning."

"I argued so to myself. Clarice was at a distance, in London as we supposed, and Mr. Carlton was at South Wennock; that very evening, as late as half-past seven, he had been at our house with papa. This dream of mine took place before ten, for I heard the clock strike after I awoke. I did not like Mr. Carlton previously; we do take likes and dislikes; but it is

impossible to tell you how very much that dream set me against him. Unjustly, you will say; but we cannot help these things. He was, ever after, associated in my mind with terror, with dread; and I would rather have seen you marry any one else in the world. This night, for the first time, I begin to see that the dream had a meaning, for Clarice must have been at South Wennock; the note of hers was dated the tenth, the previous Friday."

"How absurd, Jane! What meaning?"

"I cannot conjecture; unless, as I say, those young Wests brought any ill on Clarice, and Mr. Carlton was privy to it."

Laura would not accept the suggestion; she ridiculed it in the highest degree. And when she at length went away to her room she left a mocking, laughing word of censure behind her at Jane for what she called her "folly."

"I shall go to Mrs. Jenkinson's in the morning," murmured Jane.

She spoke aloud, though the words were but uttered in commune with herself. Judith came forward, a little wash-leather bag in her hand.

"It will be of no use your going to Mrs. Jenkinson—as I believe, my lady. Did your ladyship ever see this?"

She took a trinket from the bag and laid it in Lady Jane's hand. An elegant little locket, the back of blue enamel, the rim set round with pearls, with a short fine gold chain some three inches in length attached to it on either side. Lady Jane needed to cast but one glance at it.

"Oh, Judith!" she cried, "where did you get this? It belongs to Lady Clarice."

"It *did* belong to her," returned Judith, in a low tone. "My lady, I can tell you what became of her, I think. But the tale is full of horror and distress; one that you will not like to hear."

"Tell it," murmured Lady Jane, "tell it, whatever it may be."

"That poor lady about whom so much has been said in South Wennock — who died the very night of your dream, my lady, not at Mrs. Jenkinson's, but at the Widow Gould's, next door to it — *she* gave me the locket."

Lady Jane stood with dilating eyes. She could not sufficiently collect her ideas to understand.

"I speak of Mrs. Crane, my lady, who died after taking the composing draught sent in by Mr. Stephen Grey."

"She could not have been my sister!" panted Lady Jane, scarcely above her breath. "Judith, *she* could not have been my sister!"

"I truly believe she must have been so, my lady," whispered Judith. "She told me it was her own hair inside. And that letter, which Lady Laura brought in to-night, was the one read by the coroner at the inquest; that was only partially read, that is to say, for the half of it was missing."

Jane sank down on her knees, unable to support herself in the shock of discovery. Just as she had sunk in another shock of discovery once before, that long-ago evening when her father had brought home his unwelcome bride.

CHAPTER XXV.

Cross-Purposes.

THE revelation disturbed the previous theory of Lady Jane. Mrs. Crane? then it appeared to be evident that Clarice had married the Mr. Crane spoken of by Mrs. West. But there were discrepancies still. How account for the assertion in that letter to her husband, that she did not go by her proper name, when she had called herself Mrs. Crane?

What feeling induced Jane to withhold the news of this discovery from Laura? Any prompting instinct? What feeling caused her to give orders for quitting Mr. Carlton's house on the following morning — hurrying away Lucy, almost at the risk of her health? Of the true facts of the case she was in complete uncertainty; but a dark suspicion kept floating within her that the man seen on the stairs by Mr. Carlton the night of the death was the husband, Crane. The poor lady had asserted her husband was travelling; but, by the letter above alluded to, it was apparent her husband was then in South Wennock. It was altogether incomprehensible. Judith wore a timid, downcast look when questioned by her mistress, as if fearing she should be asked too much.

"This is a sudden departure, Lady Jane," cried Mr. Carlton, as she went into his presence in the morning. "I thought you would have been here at least a few days longer. Mind! I do not give a guarantee that Lucy is fit to be moved."

"I take the risk upon myself, Mr. Carlton. I — I thank you sincerely for your hospitality, for your kind-

ness and attention to Lucy, but I am anxious to be in my own home. I feel that I must be free; free to pursue this investigation of which I spoke to you last night, regarding the fate of my sister Clarice. Had you been more open with me, Mr. Carlton, I might not have gone."

A shade of annoyance passed across his countenance. "It is a singular thing that you should persist in attributing to me a knowledge of these things, Lady Jane!"

"My firm conviction is, that you do possess the knowledge," was Jane's answer. "But in speaking of Clarice last night, I may have somewhat misled you; I was misled myself. It was not at Mrs. Jenkinson's she stayed when at South Wennock, but at the next door. That ill-fated lady who died at the Widow Gould's was my sister Clarice."

Mr. Carlton made no reply. He looked hard at Jane.

"She called herself Mrs. Crane. Of course I can only conclude that she married, not Tom West, but the Mr. Crane who used to visit at the Wests'. You must have known him well, Mr. Carlton. What sort of a man was he?"

"Sort of man?" repeated Mr. Carlton, who seemed half buried in his own thoughts. "He was a short man, stout, had black hair. At least, if my memory serves me well. I protest that I have never seen or heard of him, since the time he used to go to the Wests. What have you learnt, Lady Jane, that can induce you to think that dead lady was your sister?"

"Short and stout, with black hair," repeated Jane, unmindful of the rest. "It must have been him, the same you saw on the stairs."

"That it was not," burst forth Mr. Carlton, unusually heated. "The face I saw on the stairs — if I did see one — bore no earthly resemblance to any one I had ever seen in all my life."

"Did you know that Clarice — that Miss Beauchamp, married Mr. Crane?"

"I did not."

"I *cannot* divest myself of the idea that you know more of this past business than you say," she rejoined. "I want the clue to it. If you can furnish it, why will you not? You certainly were called in to Mrs. Crane: you gave evidence to that effect at the inquest."

"We are at cross-purposes, Lady Jane," was the surgeon's answer. "I can tell you nothing whatever. The lady I was called to attend in Palace Street was a stranger. As to the supposition you have taken up, that she was your sister, I think you must be wholly mistaken. But whether or not, my advice to you would be to let it drop. No good can result, investigate it as you will; the poor lady cannot be recalled to life, and it would not be pleasant for you or for my wife to have the matter raked up and spread before the public. Let it drop, Lady Jane."

"I shall never let it drop," answered Jane. "And the unpleasantness — we must put up with that."

"As you please, of course," said Mr. Carlton, with indifference. "I can say no more."

At cross-purposes they seemed indeed to be, and at cross-purposes they parted. Jane began to doubt whether she who died really was Miss Beauchamp, but she was resolute in her work of discovery, and as soon as Lucy was safe at home she went at once to Tupper's

cottage. Judith told her that Mrs. Smith had confessed to her that the child was Mrs. Crane's.

Generally speaking, the door stood open: the sun, streaming in on a bright winter's day, was cheering: but it was shut now. Mrs. Smith came to open it, and Jane said she wished for half an hour's interview with her, if she was at leisure.

"At too much leisure," was the woman's sad reply. "I am but watching the dead."

"The dead! He is not dead — that little child?"

"He is. He died between nine and ten this morning."

Jane sank down on a chair in the kitchen. "And I never gave him a kiss for his mother's sake! I never knew that he belonged to her. Dead! He was — as I believe — my little nephew."

The woman stared at her. "*Your* nephew, madam! You are one of the Ladies Chesney."

"Yes — stay. This little child's mother died in Palace Street. Who was she? What was her married name?"

"I don't know. I would give a great deal to know."

Lady Jane felt sick at heart. Was it to be ever thus? Was obstacle after obstacle ever to be thrust in her way?

"I pray you let us have no more concealment!" she said, in a voice of anguish. "If I cannot come to the bottom of this business by fair entreaty, I must call in the help of the law. Did you never know that young lady's name before her marriage or after it?"

"I knew it before — at least the one she went by. I knew her first when she was governess at the Lortons'. She was Miss Beauchamp."

"And my dear sister!" exclaimed Jane, her doubts at rest. "Whom did she marry?"

Mrs. Smith held out her hard hand. "I'd give this to know."

"Let me see the child," said Jane.

He was lying on the bed up-stairs in his white nightgown, a little cambric-bordered cap shading his wan white face. His hands were laid by his side, and some sprigs of geranium were strewn on the sheet.

"He was so fond of flowers in life," said Mrs. Smith. "Geraniums especially. So was his mother."

Jane's tears fell upon the placid little countenance, and she stooped and kissed it. "I did not do it while he lived," she said. "Why did you not tell me whose child he was then?"

"Nay, my lady, why did you not tell me who his mother was? — how was I to suspect she could be anything to the Ladies Chesney? I only knew her as a governess. Passers-by were always asking me about him out of idle curiosity, just because they saw he was ill, and that we were strangers in the place: I thought you only asked from the same motive."

"You were attached to his mother," said Jane, as she gave a short history of her sister Clarice.

"I don't think I was ever so much attached to anybody," was Mrs. Smith's answer; "though it was not for long I knew her."

"Then I ask you by that attachment to give me every particular you can respecting her."

"You might have heard all I know long ago, my lady, had I but been aware what you were to her. I knew her first at the Lortons' in Gloucester Terrace. I and Mrs. Lorton are cousins; yes, we are; she's a

great lady, and lives in style, and tries to make herself out a greater; but she'll never be one, let her try ever so. We lived in a country town; her father was a pastry-cook, and mine (they were brothers) kept a public-house. She thought the pastry line was more genteel than the public line, and held up her head rather. She married, married well — some London gentleman — and I stopped at home for many years, marrying nobody. In course of time my father and mother died, and all they had became mine. What with their savings and the sale of the business, I found I had about a hundred and fifty pounds a year. Then came my turn. George Smith, who had used our house for years, was sweet upon me, as the saying runs, and said why should we not join our means together: his salary, a hundred and fifty, and my hundred and fifty, would make three hundred, and we should be comfortable for life? I said nothing against it, but that I was getting on to be forty years of age and liked my own way; he, poor fellow, was turned forty by some years, and as mild as milk. So we married, and settled in London, where his master's house of business was, he being their country traveller. I couldn't set up for a lady, and I didn't; I was as plain and rough as ever; that didn't please Mrs. Lorton, and she shunned me; but when, soon after, Mrs. Lorton was taken with a dangerous illness, she was glad enough to send for me to nurse her through it. It was then I saw Miss Beauchamp; I thought her the sweetest girl I had ever met, and the more I saw of her the more I liked her. A real lady she was, there was no mistaking that; she had none of Mrs. Lorton's stuck-up airs, but spoke gently and kindly to folks, as if they

were human beings. I was there for a month, for my husband was away on his journey, and when I left, Miss Beauchamp promised faithfully to come and see me at Islington, where we lived. She did come, and she told me she had left Mrs. Lorton's, through that great big booby of a son making up to her, and had gone to Mrs. West's. After that, I saw no more of her for some months, till — I think it must have been September in the following year; and then she came, and asked if I could recommend her to a lodging. Of course I was surprised, and she told me she would confide a secret to me — that she was married. I asked why it was a secret; she laughed, and said for two reasons; one was, that her husband could not and would not tell his father, on account of some money matters between them that were not settled amicably; and the other reason was, that she, on her part, could not tell her family, for they were very high and proud, and would say she had disgraced them by her choice. Her husband, she said, was a professional man, and as soon as he got on well, so as to keep her in comfort and tolerable style, then they should declare it, and care for nobody."

"What did she say her name was?" interrupted Lady Jane.

"She did not say, madam. When I pressed her, she said it was better that it should not be known, especially as I was connected with the Gloucester Terrace Lortons; it might get to them and it might get to the Wests, and that would not do. I said, then what was I to call her, and she laughed again, and said I might call her Miss Beauchamp; she was not afraid of my misconstruing her position. My lady, she never

left my house again until she came down to South Wennock."

"Never left it!"

"I mean, not to live. Ours was a good house, and I said the drawing-room and bed-room level with it were at her service; but she *would* pay for them, and my servant waited on her. In the December my little child was born, the only one I ever had; and she, dear lady, used to sit with me, and be —"

"But did her husband never come to see her all that time?" interrupted Lady Jane, with wonder.

"Never once to my house. From what I could gather — for she would let a word now and then drop in forgetfulness — he seemed to have left London to live in the country. He would occasionally come to London, and of that she made no secret, and at those times she would go out and be away a day or two. But I never knew where she stayed."

"How were her letters addressed?" asked Jane. "She must have received letters."

"No letters came to the house; she used to go to Islington post-office for them. Once, when she was expecting one, she was too ill to go out, and sent the maid. I saw the letter in the girl's hand as she came in; it was directed 'C. C.'"

"For Clarice Crane," thought Jane. Though it might have served equally for Clarice Chesney.

"Towards the next March she got restless; she would be expecting her own illness in May, and she did not like to lie up so far from her husband. She said she would go down to where he lived, whether he was pleased or not. He said she was not to go — so she told me; and I spoke against it; I did not think

she was strong enough to travel. I was in great grief at that time, for my child had died; and, as to my husband, I thought he'd never be pacified. When old folks like us get blessed with a child for the first time, they are as fond of it and proud of it as a dog with two tails. Ah, well!" added Mrs. Smith, in an indifferent tone, as she rubbed her nose, "it's all over, and I'm almost glad it didn't live, for the world's full of trouble and care and wickedness. Miss Beauchamp promised that I should have the nursing of hers, and, my lady, I looked to that promise like a famished man looks to meat, for I am naturally fond of young children: and I didn't want her to go away, lest I should not get the baby, after all."

"But she went?"

"She went; there was no stopping her. She packed her things in one large trunk, burning all her letters and papers, and left on the morning of the tenth of March; I well remember the day, it was on a Friday. On the next day, the Saturday, I was out with some friends, country people who had come to London for a few days' pleasuring. They were at an inn near the Strand, and nothing would do but I must go and breakfast with them, which they had made me promise to do, and I went out early, before the post was in. When I got home at night there was a letter from Miss Beauchamp, asking me to go to her, for she was ill at South Wennock. I took the night-train, and when I arrived I found the baby was born — the least child, nearly, I ever saw. I was very angry with her, my lady; I could not help it: and she had endangered her life for nothing, as may be said, for when she got to South Wennock, her husband was away."

"Away?" interrupted Lady Jane.

"So she said. And by a slip word she let drop, I thought he was a surgeon, but I was not sure. I took the baby away with me that same evening. I could not stop, for, as ill luck would have it, my husband was coming home on the Monday, sick. She told me to have the baby baptised, and to name him 'Lewis' — and it occurred to me that it might be the name of his father. I took the liberty of adding George to it, after my husband."

There was a long pause. "Did you know she went by the name of Crane?" asked Lady Jane.

"She told me in her letter to ask for her by that name. I inquired of her, after I reached South Wrennock, whether it was her real name, and she laughed and said, no more real than Beauchamp, nor half so much so; it was a name that her husband and young Mr. West were very fond of calling her, partly because she had a peculiar way of arching her neck, partly to tease her. Some gentleman, named Crane, to whom she had an aversion, used to visit at the Wests', and, to make her angry, they would call her by his name, Mrs. Crane. She said it had never struck her that she should want a name for South Wrennock until she was close upon the place, and then she thought of that one — Crane; it would do for her as well as any other, until she assumed her legal one, which she supposed she should now soon do. I found great fault: I said she ought to have assumed it and been with her husband before the child was born; and we had quite words. She defended him, and said it would have been so, but for the child's coming before its time. She charged me not to write to her, *not to communicate*

at all with her, until she wrote to me. We had nearly a fight upon another point: she wanted me to say I would be paid for the child; I steadily refused it. It was a boon to me to have the child, and I was at ease in my circumstances. My lady, I took away the child, and I never heard one word from her, good or bad, afterwards."

"Never at all?"

"Never at all. My husband was at home with a long illness, and afterwards removed to Paisley, where he had a good situation offered him. Some friends took to our house at Islington and to the carpets and curtains, and there I left a letter, saying where we had gone, directing it 'Mrs. Crane, late Miss Beauchamp.' It was never applied for."

"And you never wrote to South Wennock?" cried Lady Jane.

"I never did. I own I was selfish; I was afraid of losing the child, and my husband he had got to love it as much as I did. I argued, if she wanted the child she would be sure to apply for it. Besides, I thought I might do some mischief by writing, and I did not know her real name or address."

"But what could you think of her silence? — of her leaving the child?"

"We thought it might arise from one of two reasons. Either that she had gone abroad with her husband to America, or some distant colony (and she had said something about it in the early days when she was first at my house), and that her letters to me from thence must miscarry: or else that — you must pardon me for speaking it, my lady — that she was not married, and shrank from claiming the child. I did not

believe it was so, but my husband used to think it might be."

Jane made no reply.

"Anyway we were thankful to keep him. And when my husband died last spring, his care in his last illness was more for the child than for me. I sold off then, and determined to come to South Wennock: partly to hear what I could of Mrs. Crane: partly to see if the child's native air would do him good; he had never been strong. I never shall forget the shock when I got here and heard how Mrs. Crane had died."

Poor Jane thought she should never forget the shock of the previous night, when told that Mrs. Crane was Clarice Chesney.

"What I can't make out is, that her husband has never been heard of," resumed Mrs. Smith, breaking the pause of silence. "I — I am trying to put two and two together, as the saying goes, but somehow I can't do it; I get baffled. There's a talk of a dark man having been seen on the stairs near her room that night; one would think he must have been the husband, stolen in there to work the ill."

"I don't know," shivered Lady Jane. "Since you have been speaking, other dark fears have come upon me. Fears which I dare not look upon."

Yes; various fears, and thoughts, and remembrances were stirring within her. A recollection of that scrap of letter, found by Lady Laura in her drawer of fine laces soon after becoming Mr. Carlton's wife, rose up. Laura had always persisted that the paper must have come from Cedar Lodge amidst her clothes: how else, she argued, could it have got there? Now Jane began to think (what she would have thought previously but

for its apparent impossibility) that the paper must have been in the drawer before Laura ever went into the house; that it must have slipped under the paper covering of the drawer, and lain there, it was impossible to say how long. It had never occurred to her or to Laura to connect Mr. Carlton with it at all; and the little matter had puzzled Jane more than she cared to think of. Could the letter have been written to Mr. Crane? surely it had not been written to Mr. Carlton! But how came it in the drawer? Had Mr. Crane ever visited Mr. Carlton at South Wennock? And again, there was Clarice's denial that her name was Crane. *What had been Mr. Carlton's part in it all?* was the chief question that agitated Jane's mind now.

She stayed with Mrs. Smith, talking and talking, and it was growing dusk when she quitted the cottage to walk home. But as Lady Jane went down Blister Lane and turned on to the Rise, she started nervously at every shadow in the hedge, just as Mr. Carlton had started at them some years before.

CHAPTER XXVI.

Judith's Story.

IN the twilight of the winter's evening, in the drawing-room of Lady Jane's house, Frederick Grey was sitting with Lucy Chesney. The removal from Mr. Carlton's that day did not appear to have hurt her, she seemed the stronger for it, and though Judith kept assuring her that she ought to go to her chamber and lie down, Lucy stayed where she was.

The interview was a gloomy one. It was Frederick Grey's farewell visit, for he was going back to London

the following day. But the gloom did not arise from that cause, but from another. Lucy had been telling him something, and he grew hot and angry.

The fact was, Lady Jane, in her perplexity and tribulation at finding the deceased lady, Mrs. Crane, to have been Clarice Chesney, had that morning dropped a word in Lucy's hearing to the effect that the discovery might be the means of breaking off the contemplated marriage. Of course, Lucy was making herself very miserable, and her lover was indignant.

"On what grounds?" he chafed, for he had rather a hot temper. "On what grounds?"

"Jane thinks it will not be seemly that we should marry, if the mistake that brought Clarice her death was made by Sir Stephen. The medicine, you know."

"Jane must be getting into her dotage," he angrily exclaimed. "Sir Stephen never did make the mistake. Lucy, my darling, be at ease: we cannot be parted now."

Lucy's tears were dropping fast: she was weak from her recent illness. To marry in opposition to Jane could never be thought of, and Jane was firm when she once took a notion into her head. In the midst of this, Jane came in from her visit to the little dead boy at Tupper's cottage, and Frederick Grey spoke out his mind, somewhat warmly. Judith, who entered the room to take her lady's bonnet, stood in surprise and concern: her sympathies were wholly with Frederick Grey and Lucy. He had not observed Judith enter.

"Oh, my lady," she exclaimed, impulsively, "it would not be right to separate them. Should the innocent suffer for the guilty?"

"The guilty? the guilty?" mused Lady Jane. "How are we to know who is guilty?"

Judith stood still, a strange expression of eagerness, blended with indecision, on her white face. She looked at Lady Jane, she looked at Frederick Grey; and she suddenly threw down the bonnet she held, and lifted her hands.

"I'll speak," she exclaimed. "I'll declare what I know. Ever since last night I have been telling myself I ought to do it. And I wish I had done it years ago!"

They looked at her in astonishment. What had come to quiet, sober Judith?

"My lady, you ask who was guilty — how is it to be known? I think I know who it was: I think it was Mr. Carlton. I could almost have proved it at the time."

"Oh, Judith!" exclaimed Frederick Grey reproachfully, while Jane dropped her head upon her hand, and Lucy gazed around, wondering if they had all gone crazy. "And you have suffered my father to lie under the suspicion all these years!"

"I did not dare to speak," was Judith's answer. "Who was I, a poor humble servant, that I should bring an accusation against a gentleman — a gentleman like Mr. Carlton, thought well of in the place? Nobody would have listened to me, sir. Besides, in spite of my doubts, I could not believe he was guilty. I thought I must have made some strange mistake. And I feared that the tables might have been turned upon me, and *I* accused."

Whatever she knew, and however long she might have suppressed it, there was no resource but to speak out fully now. She took up her position against the wall, partially hidden by the folds of the crimson cur-

tains from what little light the fire gave. Lucy sat forward on the sofa as one dazed, Lady Jane's face was still shaded by her hand, Frederick Grey stood with his elbow on the mantelpiece.

"I will not be Mr. Carlton's accuser," she began. "No, my lady, I will simply tell what I saw, and let others judge: the impression of his guilt on my mind may have been altogether some great mistake. I—I suppose I must begin at the beginning?"

"You must begin at the beginning and go on to the ending," interposed Frederick Grey, authoritatively.

"And I'll do it," said Judith. "On the Sunday evening when that poor lady, Mrs. Crane, lay ill at the Widow Gould's, I stepped in between eight and nine to wish her good night. I had a bad face-ache; it was in pain all over: and I wanted to get to bed. The widow and Nurse Pepperfly were at supper in the kitchen; I saw them as I passed the kitchen window, and I ran up-stairs quietly, not disturbing them. I had no light, and I found the bedroom in darkness, but it was a fine moonlight night. I spoke to Mrs. Crane, but she was asleep, and did not answer, and I sat down by the bed, behind the curtain, and nursed my face for a minute or two. There came a ring at the door-bell, and I heard Mrs. Gould go to answer it, and attend the visitor up-stairs. I thought it might be Mr. Stephen Grey, but as they came into the adjoining sitting-room, I heard Mrs. Gould address him as Mr. Carlton. She went down again, and he came into the chamber, without the light. His coming in awoke Mrs. Crane, for I heard her start and stir, and he approached the bed. 'Clarice,' said he, 'Clarice, how

could you be so imprudent, so foolish, as to come to South Wennock?' 'Oh, Lewis, I am so thankful you have returned!' she answered in a joyful, loving tone, which struck me with amazement. 'Don't be angry with me; we can keep our secret; but I could not bear the thought of being ill so far away. It is such a sweet little boy!' 'It was exceedingly wrong, Clarice,' he went on, in a vexed tone; but I heard no more, for I stole out of the room. I heard Mr. Carlton say 'Who's there?' but I sped down the stairs quietly in my list shoes, for I did not like them to think they had been overheard. As I went by the kitchen Mrs. Gould spoke to me, telling me, I remember, of an accident that had happened to Mr. Carlton that evening in coming from Great Wennock. I ran in home, and went to bed; but what with the pain in my face, and the words I had overheard next door, I could get no rest. It seemed a mystery to me and nothing less, that the young lady should be so intimate with Mr. Carlton, when she had asked about him and spoken of him as a stranger. It came into my mind to wonder whether he could be her husband, but I thought I must be downright foolish to suppose such a thing. However, it was no business of mine, and I knew I could keep my own counsel."

"Go on, Judith," said Lady Jane, for Judith had paused in thought.

"The next day I was anything but well, for I had had no sleep, and the pain in my face worried me. In the afternoon it began to swell, and in the evening, when Mr. Stephen Grey came to see Mrs. Crane, he told me the swelling would make it easier, but that I ought to tie it up. It was just seven when Mr.

Stephen came in, and he expected Mr. Carlton; he waited till a quarter past, but Mr. Carlton did not come. He observed that Mrs. Crane was flushed and looked feverish, and he spoke quite sharp to me and Mrs. Pepperfly, and said there had been too much gossiping going on; we replied that the lady would talk, feeling well, and we could not prevent her. He said he should send in a composing draught: and he left. I returned home to tie my face up, but at first I was puzzled what to tie it with, as my boxes were not at Mrs. Jenkinson's, and a pocket-handkerchief was hardly warm enough. I laid hold of an old piece of black plush, which had covered a bonnet I had worn all the winter, and had unpicked that day. It was not worth much, and I cut it into two, and doubled the pieces together, so that they formed two ears or lappets, fastened them to some black tape, and tied them up round my chin and the sides of my face. I had got on a black cap, being in mourning for my late mistress, and when I saw myself in the glass, I thought I did look a guy. What with my swollen face, which was glazed and puffy and white, and my black eyes, blacker they seemed than usual, and this flossy plush round my face, I was a sight! 'Goodness me!' exclaimed Margaret when I got down-stairs, 'what have you been at with yourself? one would think you had got a pair of sudden-grown whiskers!' and she wasn't far wrong, as appearance went, for the little edge of the black quilled net-border close to my face, and the rough plush behind it, made a very good imitation of whiskers. I was dead tired; I felt as if I could sleep; and after sitting awhile with Margaret, I said I'd go in and see if Mrs. Crane wanted any-

thing more that I could do, and then come back and go to bed. Like the previous night, I saw that the nurse and Mrs. Gould were at supper in the kitchen — or, rather, sitting at the supper-table, for supper seemed to be over. I went quietly up-stairs; and, knowing those two were down-stairs, I was surprised to hear a movement in the sitting-room. The first thought that struck me was, could Mrs. Crane have been so imprudent as to get out of bed after anything she might want, and I peeped in through the door, which was ajar. It was not Mrs. Crane; she was safe in bed, and the door between the two rooms was shut: it was Mr. Carlton. The light was on the mantelpiece, and he stood sideways at the chiffonier. He had a very, very small bottle in his hand, putting a cork into it, and then he put it into his waistcoat pocket. Next he took up a larger bottle, the size of those which had contained night-draughts for Mrs. Crane; it had been standing close to his hand on the chiffonier, and the cork by it; he hastily put the cork into it, and put it on the little shelf of the chiffonier, in a leaning position in the corner. He turned so quickly to leave the room, that I had not time to get out of the way; I did not know what he had been doing; I did not know it was anything wrong; but an instinct flashed across me that he would not like to find he had been watched; not that when I peeped in I had thought of doing anything mean or underhanded. I just drew up against the wall on the landing — the worst place I could have got to, for the moonlight came in upon my face — and he saw me. He could see nothing of me but my face; but he looked at me with a sort of frightened glare. My eyes, accustomed

to the dark, could just discern his face: *he* had come from the lighted room. 'Who and what are you?' he whispered, but I thought my best plan was not to answer. I did not like to go forward and speak, so I kept still. He wheeled round, and went back to the sitting-room to bring out the light, which gave me the opportunity to slip inside the closet. He ——"

"Oh, Judith!" interrupted Lady Jane, "then the man's face on the stairs, about which so much has been said, was yours!"

"My own and no other's, my lady. I was afraid to explain so, lest I should be questioned further, and I let it pass. Mr. Carlton brought out the light, but of course he could not see me, and, after he had looked all about, he went down-stairs. I heard him say something to Mrs. Gould about a man up-stairs with black whiskers, and I laughed to myself at the joke. But I did not care that anyone should know I had played it, though it had been unintentionally done, and when Mr. Carlton was gone and the women were shut up in the kitchen again, I stole down-stairs and took off the black plush ears in the yard, and put them in my pocket. I then knocked at the window, as if I had just come in, which startled them both, and Mrs. Gould called me a fool, and asked why I could not come into the house quiet and decent. I said I had come in to wish Mrs. Crane good night, and I went on upstairs. Mrs. Crane laughed at my swollen face, saying it looked like a full moon; but I thought how much more she would have laughed had she seen it in the whiskers."

Frederick Grey, who had stood with his eyes fixed

on Judith, listening to every word, interrupted with a question.

"Did you not suspect, did it not occur to you to suspect, that the draught might have been tampered with?"

"Never, sir, for a moment. How was I likely to suspect such a thing? Was not Mr. Carlton a doctor in practice? I did not *know* that he had added anything to the draught, but if I had known it, I should only have supposed it to be some alteration he deemed necessary, as her attendant, to make."

"Well, go on."

"I left them, and went in-doors to bed, and the next morning Margaret told me that Mrs. Crane had died; died the previous night before ten o'clock, through taking the sleeping draught sent her by Mr. Stephen Grey. I don't know how I felt; I could not tell it if I tried, or the dreadful doubt that came over me, whether or not Mr. Carlton had touched it. I heard of his having smelt poison in the draught when it first came, and I thought then of course the poison must have been in it; that when I saw him all alone with the bottle open, he might only be smelling at it again. Of one thing I felt certain — that Mr. Stephen Grey had not committed the error — and the state of mind, the uncertainty I was in until the inquest, no tongue could tell. I went to the inquest; I wanted to be at ease one way or the other, to have some relief from my perplexity. Young Frederick Grey — I beg your pardon, Mr. Frederick; I had got my thoughts cast back in the past — had whispered to me, that if anybody mixed poison with the draught, it was Mr. Carlton, not his father; and though I would

not listen to him, his words made a deep impression on me. At the inquest I heard Mr. Carlton give his evidence, and from that moment I believed him to have been guilty. He swore before the coroner that he neither touched nor saw the draught after he gave it back to Mrs. Pepperfly; that he did not observe or know where she placed it. That I knew to be a falsehood. He did see it and touch it, and took care to replace it in the same position which the old woman had done. He testified that he had told Mrs. Crane not to take the draught, but I felt sure he had told her nothing of the sort. He swore also that he knew nothing of Mrs. Crane, who she was, or where she came from, and *that* I knew was false. An impulse came upon me to step out before the coroner and declare all I had seen and heard, but somehow I did not dare; I feared he might turn round and set me at defiance by denying it, or even accuse me in his stead — and which of us would have been listened to? — an established gentleman, such as he; or me, an obscure servant? Part of a letter was found before the inquest was over — and, my lady, it was a faithful copy, for I remember every word, of the first part of that letter found last night by Lady Laura. The coroner showed it to Mr. Carlton, and he fenced in his answers; he took the letter to the window, and stood there with his back to the room; the jury thought nothing, but I was sure it was only to collect himself, and gain time to cover his agitation. That letter, which Lady Laura found, was the one written by Mrs. Crane the night of her arrival, for I recognised the envelope again last night; the very letter which Mrs. Gould got me to carry to Mr. Carlton's. As I

came out of the inquest-room, I felt quite sure that he had murdered the lady."

"You ought to have declared it, Judith."

"My lady, I say that people would not have believed me; there was not a jot of evidence to corroborate my tale, there was no proof at all that he knew her. If declared to them now, they will not, perhaps, believe it."

"It might have saved my sister Laura," murmured Lady Jane.

"I did what little I could to keep her from Mr. Carlton. After I went to live with you, my lady, Pompey let slip a word that Miss Laura — as she was then — used to go in the garden in secret, at the dusk hour, to meet Mr. Carlton. I could not say anything to Mr. Carlton openly: but I thought I might frighten him, and warn Miss Laura. One night that they were there (it was the very night before they went away) I took off my white cap and put on a black, tied on those plush whiskers, which I have kept by me to this day, put a cap of Pompey's on my head, and threw on my master's old cloak. When I got to their meeting-place in the garden Miss Laura was alone; he had gone. It was nearly dark amidst the trees, where I stood; she could get but an imperfect view of me, and I disguised my voice to gruffness, and warned her, in the best way I knew how, against Mr. Carlton. Mr. Carlton saw me as I was stealing back again, and I raised the cap and he saw my face in the moonlight. He look frightened to death; I suppose he knew it again for the same face he had seen on the landing that night, and I glided amidst the trees until he had gone. I have appeared to him in

the same way once or twice since. You may remember, my lady, the night we returned home after my lord's death. When we had left Lady Laura and gone on, you discovered that her dressing-case had been forgotten in the fly. I got out to take it to her, saying I would walk home afterwards. I left it at the servants' entrance, and in passing the dining-room window, coming away, I saw Mr. Carlton by the light of the fire. I pushed back my bonnet, snatched my black scarf off my neck, tied it down the sides of my face under the chin, and pressed my nose flat against the panes, which naturally made my face look wide. He saw it was the same figure which had so terrified him before, and I heard his cry of amazement as I rushed away, putting my bonnet on as I went."

"How do you account for it, Judith — that your appearance should inspire him with this terror?" interrupted Frederick Grey.

"Sir, in this way. I think that when he first saw me, that night on the staircase, he must have feared it was somebody who had watched him mix the poison; but when no one could be traced or heard of, as having been in the house, then he doubted whether the appearance might not have been supernatural. I fancy there has been a conflict in his mind all along, sometimes giving way to the fancy that the figure was real, sometimes that it was not; and equally fearing both."

Frederick Grey nodded his head, and Judith continued.

"The years wore on, but somehow I always felt a fear of Mr. Carlton. The feeling that was upon me was — that nobody was safe with him. I daresay it was a foolish feeling, but I could not help it. When

Lady Lucy was taken ill with the fever, and Mr. Carlton kept her at his house in what might be called an underhand manner, I grew quite alarmed, wondering whether he intended any ill to her, and the night the lamp went out in the hall I whispered words to him that he did not like; I did it in my fears; and only a night or two ago I put on those plush whiskers again — for I determined to do it, and fetched them from Cedar Lodge — and made myself look altogether as much like I did that first night as I could, and stood in the dusk at the surgery window."

"But it is a strange thing he never recognised you!" interrupted Frederick Grey.

"Not strange, sir. You cannot think how those plush sides and the black border disguise my face. It looks exactly like a man's. Besides, Mr. Carlton has never seen it but in the most imperfect and uncertain light. I think he must have been struck with some faint resemblance, for Lady Laura told me laughingly the other day that there was a look in my face Mr. Carlton could not bear. And all this while, my ladies, I never had the remotest suspicion that the lady who died in Palace Street was connected with the family I serve."

Judith ceased. The tale was told. And she stood motionless within the shade of the crimson curtain in the silence that fell upon the room.

CHAPTER XXVII.

The Lawyer's Telegram.

COULD there be any doubt of the guilt of Mr. Carlton? It was scarcely to be hoped for. Jane Chesney and Frederick Grey remained alone after the revelation of Judith, pondering the question in their own minds, scarcely liking to look in each others' faces. Judith had departed from the room; Lucy was up-stairs, going to rest — if rest she might hope for. Poor Lucy thought she should never leave off shivering. She was younger than they were, more inexperienced in the ways of the world, and utterly unprepared for the disclosure. Never a doubt had crossed her of Mr. Carlton; she could scarcely believe that she must doubt him now; but she felt sick and faint.

Frederick Grey was the first to break the silence. "Do you remember, Lady Jane, a meeting between me and Mr. Carlton on the Rise, to which you were an accidental listener?" he inquired in a low tone. "Do you remember the purport of the words I said to him?"

She made a gesture in the affirmative. "I have often recalled it, and the accusation you made upon him."

"It tallies with this."

There was another long pause.

"He must have been her husband," resumed Jane, scarcely above a whisper.

"There's no doubt of it. Had she not been his wife, the necessity for putting her out of his way

could not have arisen. We must suppose that it was done to enable him to — to — marry another."

The words were spoken hesitatingly in his delicacy of feeling, remembering who that other wife was. Jane groaned aloud; she could not help herself.

"*How* can Judith have kept that dreadful secret within her all these years?" was her next exclamation.

He took his elbow from the mantelpiece, where he had been so long standing, came forward, and sat down opposite to Jane. "I have been thinking it over, Lady Jane, and I really do not see — looking back — that Judith could have done otherwise. I confess my first impression was a selfish one, a sort of resentful feeling that she should not have declared what she knew, and so cleared my father. Now that I reflect upon it dispassionately, I do not think she could have done it. As she observes, none might have believed her. Think what a strange charge it would have been to bring against a medical man!"

"But if she had disclosed the few words of conversation she heard pass between Mr. Carlton and Clarice at their first greeting? *That* surely would have established previous relations between them, and been a clue to the rest."

He shook his head. "Yes, had Judith been believed. It would all have lain in that. I think the chances are she would not have been; that Mr. Carlton could have crushed her and triumphed."

"What is to be done now?" wailed Jane.

"Nothing. You would not like to proceed against Mr. Carlton, to bring any public accusation against him. Circumstances bar it."

"Bring a public accusation against Mr. Carlton!"

repeated Jane, recoiling in horror from the thought. "And Laura his wife! No, no; I did not allude to that; I did not think of it. Clarice and Laura stand to me in the same degree, both alike my sisters; and the one, dead, must remain unavenged for the sake of the one, living. I spoke of Laura herself. What is to be done about her? She cannot be suffered to remain with Mr. Carlton."

Frederick Grey drew in his lips. It was too delicate a point for him, and he preferred not to discuss it. "I can't meddle with that, Lady Jane. She has been with him ever since, all these years."

True. Jane saw not her way clear. "How could Mr. Carlton be so bold as to keep that letter by him?" she said aloud, alluding to the letter found by her sister, and which she had been describing to Frederick Grey.

"Ah, that's inexplicable," was his quick reply. "At least it would be, but that we every day see guilty men commit the most unaccountable mistakes: mistakes that the world can only marvel at. It may be, that some fatal blindness overtakes their minds and judgments, causing them to bring upon themselves their own doom. We have a Latin proverb, Lady Jane: '*Quos Deus vult perdere, prius dementat.*'"

But the reader — if he possesses any memory — can explain the fact, in this instance, better than Frederick Grey. Whatever mistakes Mr. Carlton committed in that unhappy business as against his self-preservation, this was not one, for the retention of the letter was unintentional. Do you remember that he searched for the letter and could not find it, and came to the conclusion that he had burnt it with some others,

notes and trifles of no consequence? He put one letter away in his iron safe, supposing it to be a note from his father that he wished to preserve; the real fact being that *this* was the letter he put up, the one from his father he burnt. All in a mistake. A chance mistake, people might have said; but how many of these trifling "chances" may be traced in the chain, leading to the discovery of some great crime. It happened that Mr. Carlton never had occasion to look at his father's (supposed) letter again, and there it lay forgotten, waiting to do its mission, until it was at length unearthed by the jealous hands of Mr. Carlton's wife. Had he not tried that wife, had he been always loyal to her, the past crime might never have been brought home to him during life.

For it was that letter that led to the final discovery; it was the turning point that drove home the guilt where it was due; and yet it may be said that the chain leading to it was linked by accident, more than by design.

Lady Jane, painfully perplexed, had brought away the letter when she quitted Mr. Carlton's house that morning. She had it in her pocket at Mrs. Smith's, and after the explanation had taken place, Jane showed her the letter, in the hope that it might lead to some elucidation of who the husband was, to whom it was evidently written. Even then Jane had no suspicion of Mr. Carlton, or if she had, it was only in a secondary sort of degree. She believed that Clarice had married Mr. Crane, and that however Mr. Carlton might have been mixed up in the affair, it had been only as a friend and associate of Mr. Crane's. Jane would have shown the letter to Frederick Grey, but it was not just

now in her possession. She described it, and he caught the clue at once.

"Ah, yes, it was to her husband she wrote it; Mr. Carlton. But the playful style in which, as you describe, it is written, would mislead anyone who has not the key. They would never suppose that the husband spoken of, and the medical man she says she must ask to come to see her, were one and the same. I should like my father to see that letter, Lady Jane."

"Oh yes, he shall see it. You — you are sure Sir Stephen would not use it against him?" she added quickly.

"Against Mr. Carlton? Oh no. I don't think he would do it in any case, certainly not in this. My father is the kindest man breathing. Lucy will be his daughter-in-law; and Mr. Carlton is her sister's husband. Sir Stephen must lie under suspicion still, for Lucy's sake — perhaps I ought rather to say for Lady Laura's sake. It has not hurt him, Lady Jane, he had out-lived the odium: witness how he was received the other day at South Wennock."

But if Frederick Grey and Lady Jane agreed that the affair altogether, including the letter, must be suppressed, there was another individual who took, unfortunately, just the opposite view of it. That was Mrs. Smith. And at this very moment, while they were so speaking, she was making the first move to publish it.

Chance links, fitting one into the other! chance events, words, trifles in the chain of discovery! From the hour in which Mrs. Smith had found Mr. Carlton searching in her drawers, she had had a sort of suspicion of him, *not* that he was the husband of Mrs.

Crane, but that he held some secret connected with that past time. The little boy, Lewis, had told her he heard Mr. Carlton looking into drawers up-stairs as well as down, and the woman wondered excessively. Like most secretive persons she dwelt much upon it in her own mind; and when the time came — as it did come — that a little fresh evidence bearing on the past met her ears, a half suspicion crept into her mind of the worst, as connected with Mr. Carlton.

You may remember Mrs. Smith's afternoon of levee. You may remember that Judith as she left the cottage met Mr. Carlton driving up to it; and you may also remember a casual remark to the effect that Mr. Carlton returned home from that visit a little put out with some trifles that had occurred there. Very greatly to his annoyance, the Widow Gould — whom he had not the honour of meeting frequently in private society — brought up the subject of Mrs. Crane. Her tongue was long enough for two, and she had not the least tact. She alluded openly to the fact of Mrs. Smith being the person who took away the child, and persisted in speaking of the past in a manner not at all agreeable to the surgeon. Mrs. Pepperfly (also a visitor) thought no harm in chiming in, now that it was commented upon openly, and the two kept up a duet as long as they had the chance, which was as long as Mr. Carlton was attending to the child, then on Mrs. Smith's lap in the kitchen. The final remark of Mrs. Gould capped it all.

"I could have declared that you was known to her, Mr. Carlton, sir, the very day she first come to South Wennock. It were in this way: Mrs. Crane —"

The surgeon turned round, a sort of glare in his

eyes. If looks could enforce silence, the Widow Gould had been silenced then. But she did not understand; she had no tact.

"Mrs. Crane asks who were the doctors here, and I told her the Mr. Greys and Mr. Carlton. Then she writes a note to Mr. Carlton, telling me to send it — as have been known to South Wennock many a day, for I told it out at the inquest. But when I had took the note down-stairs, I saw it had got your Chrissen name outside it, sir, Lewis. Many a time have I wondered how she got at the name. Judy said Mrs. Fitch might have told it, but Mrs. Fitch said she didn't, and —"

"Is it well to have this gossip in the room when your child's so ill?" sternly asked the surgeon of Mrs. Smith. "It is bad for him; and it must not be. You might choose a better time, I think, to receive visitors."

The words, the tone, took Mrs. Gould by surprise. She sat a moment with her mouth open, and then seemed to shrink into nothing, too completely checked to offer even a whisper of apology. Mr. Carlton gave a short direction in regard to the child, strode out to his carriage, and was driven away.

"How did I offend him?" breathed the Widow Gould then, questioning the other two with her eyes.

"I wish you'd go on with what you were saying about the Christian name," returned Mrs. Smith. "I never heard this before."

"It's not much to go on with. When I saw the name, Lewis Carlton, Esq., on the letter, I wondered how she knew it was Lewis, and I've wondered since. Judy said his name must have been in the newspaper I had took up to her to read while she had her tea,

but I looked in it after she was dead, and I couldn't see it. I saw his name, 'Mr. Carlton,' but I couldn't see 'Lewis.'"

"Is Mr. Carlton's name Lewis?" asked Mrs. Smith. The Widow Gould opened her eyes at the question. "I thought all South Wennock knew that."

Perhaps all South Wennock did know it; nevertheless Mrs. Smith did not. It was a singular fact that Mrs. Smith until that hour had remained ignorant of Mr. Carlton's Christian name. She might possibly have heard it before, but if so it had escaped her notice. The plate on his door was no longer "Mr. Lewis Carlton;" it had been changed to "Mr. Carlton" upon his father's death.

This little incident, the revelation of the name, and Mr. Carlton's uncalled for anger, had made a great impression on Mrs. Smith. She had always surmised that Lewis must have been the Christian name of Mrs. Crane's husband, and her doubts of Mr. Carlton were certainly aroused. She had said to Lady Jane this present morning that she was trying to "put two and two together," and could not do it. In plain English, had she but spoken out, she would have said she was suspecting Mr. Carlton, but wanted the clue to unite facts with doubts. After she had made this remark, Lady Jane showed her the letter, and she thought Mrs. Smith would never have finished looking at it, which she did in silence, making no comment.

"Would you mind leaving this note with me for an hour or two, my lady?" she then asked. "I should like to think it over when I am alone."

Lady Jane saw no reason why she should not leave the note; she still thought it had been written to Mr.

Crane; and after her departure from the cottage, Mrs. Smith sat down, note in hand, and deliberated; not upon whether Mr. Carlton was guilty or not; the letter, which *she* saw correctly, had completely settled that doubt in her own mind: but upon what her course should be to work it home to him, to bring him to his punishment. Never for a moment had Mrs. Smith wavered in her intention to bring Clarice Beauchamp's destroyer to justice if she succeeded in discovering him, and that she knew she had done now. Lady Jane Chesney in her own home felt not more sure of Mr. Carlton's guilt, now that she had heard Judith's story, than did Mrs. Smith in her home at Tupper's cottage, *not* having heard it.

"What had I best do?" she communed with herself. "See a magistrate at once, and tell my story; or see a lawyer, and get him to act? I have not been much in the way of these things, thank Heaven, and I hardly know the right manner to set about it. But I'll do one of the two this blessed night."

When the mind is in this excited, determined frame, action is almost imperative, and Mrs. Smith put on her bonnet to go out. But she found her progress frustrated. The young woman-servant, who had been away all the afternoon, and only came back to the cottage when Lady Jane was leaving it, positively declined to be left alone in the house with the little dead boy.

"You great simpleton!" exclaimed Mrs. Smith in her indignation. "You are old enough to know better. What do you suppose that dead baby would do to you?"

The girl could not say what; had no very defined

idea what; but she wholly refused to try. If Mrs. Smith went out, she'd go out too; she'd not dare to stop.

The difficulty was solved by an arrival; that of Mrs. Pepperfly. Never had the old woman been so welcome to Mrs. Smith, and she consented to stay the evening. In point of fact, it was just the intention she had come with.

"Who are the magistrates here?" asked Mrs. Smith.

"Magistrates?" repeated Mrs. Pepperfly, looking astonished.

"Are there any living about here? I wanted to see one."

Mrs. Pepperfly could not overget the surprise. Magistrates and their places of domicile were not much in her line of knowledge, and she really could give no information. "If it's to register the boy's death, it ain't a magistrate you must go to," she said. "And you'll want a certificate from Mr. Carlton. Them register men won't do nothing without one."

"It's not to register the death; that's done; it's for something else — a little private matter of my own. Perhaps you can recommend me to a clever lawyer? — he might do for me better than a magistrate."

"The cleverest lawyer I know is Mr. Drone, two doors from the Red Lion," returned Mrs. Pepperfly. "He haven't got his equal in the place. Let anybody in a bit o' trouble go to him, and he's safe to pull 'em through it. He's what they call the justices' clerk."

Accepting the recommendation, Mrs. Smith set forth on her night walk. She passed down the Rise, and through the town as far as the Red Lion. Just

beyond, on the door of a private house, she read, "Mr. Drone, Solicitor;" she rang the bell, and asked to see him.

Mr. Drone was anything but an exemplification of his name; he was a little man, particularly brisk and active. He came to Mrs. Smith with a red face; he had been eating his dinner, and had since been toasting himself over the fire, for it was a very cold night.

The fire in the inner office, a small square room, where Mrs. Smith had been shown, was nearly out, but the lawyer cracked it up, and put on some more coal. They sat down, the table covered with the lawyer's papers between them, and Mrs. Smith told her tale from beginning to end, the little lawyer, in his eagerness, interrupting her with perpetual questions.

The story astonished him beyond expression. Again and again he asked whether there could be no mistake. Mr. Carlton, who stood so well in the good graces of his fellow townsmen, the destroyer of that poor Mrs. Crane! and Mrs. Crane was his wife, and the sister of the Ladies Chesney? Mr. Drone thought he had never heard so improbable a tale — off the stage.

Mrs. Smith, calm, patient, persistent, went over it again. She spoke of Lady Jane's visit to her that afternoon, she handed him the letter her ladyship had left with her. Mr. Drone began to think there must be something in the story, and he set himself to recall as many particulars as he could of Mrs. Crane's death; he had been fully cognisant of them at the time.

"Does Lady Jane Chesney suspect Mr. Carlton?" he asked.

"Not she," replied Mrs. Smith. "She has no idea

it was Mr. Carlton that was Mrs. Crane's husband. She suspects it was a Mr. Crane who married her, but she does think Mr. Carlton knew of the marriage, for he was a friend of Mr. Crane's. I'm not sure, but she fears Mr. Carlton knew more about the death than he'd like to say; only however, as Mr. Crane's friend."

"But I can't see why Mr. Carlton should have destroyed this poor young lady? — allowing that he did do so, as you suspect," urged Mr. Drone.

"Nor I," said Mrs. Smith. "Unless any of his plans were put out by her coming down, and he was afraid it would be found out that she was his wife."

The lawyer pulled at his whiskers, his habit when in thought. "You see there's no certainty that she was his wife — that she was married at all, in fact."

"Then there is, for I'd stake my life upon it," angrily returned Mrs. Smith. "I'm as certain she was married as that I was married myself. You are as bad as my husband, sir; *he'd* used to say as much."

"The chief thing would be to get a proof of it," composedly returned the lawyer. "It would supply the motive, you see. I suppose you never obtained the slightest clue as to where the ceremony took place?"

"No—o," returned Mrs. Smith, hesitating at the word. "I remember once, the winter that she was at my house at Islington, we were talking about churches and marriages and such things, and she said, in a laughing sort of way, that old St. Pancras Church was as good a one to be married in as any. It did not strike me at the time that she meant anything in saying it; but it's just possible, sir, she was married there."

Mr. Drone's brisk eyes twinkled, and he made a memorandum in his pocket-book. He made other memorandums; he asked about five hundred questions more than he had already asked. And when Mrs. Smith departed, he stood at the door to watch her away, and then jumped into the omnibus just starting for Great Wennock station, and sent the following telegram to London:

"Henry Drone, South Wennock, to John Friar, Bedford Row.

"Search old St. Pancras register for 1847. Certificate of marriage wanted: Lewis Carlton to Clarice Beauchamp, or perhaps Clarice Chesney. Lose no time; bribe clerk if necessary, and send special messenger down at once with it, if obtained."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

An Interrupted Luncheon.

MRS. SMITH of Tupper's cottage and Mr. Henry Drone, solicitor and clerk to the magistrates at South Wennock, were holding a hot argument, almost a fight. With the dawn of the winter's morning, Mrs. Smith had presented herself at that gentleman's office, demanding, and obstinately persisting in the demand, that the case should be laid before the magistrates as soon as they met, and a warrant asked for to apprehend Mr. Carlton. Mr. Drone dissented: he saw no reason for being so precipitate.

"Look here," said he, "if you let this affair get wind before it's ripe, you may defeat your own ends. I am not sure that the magistrates would grant a warrant as the case stands; it's a ticklish thing, mind

you, to arrest a gentleman of hitherto good repute; once the case is taken before the court, it will be blazoned from one end of South Wennock to the other, and Mr. Carlton — if he felt so inclined — might find escape facile.”

“That’s just what I want to prevent,” retorted Mrs. Smith. “If the warrant is granted at once, he can’t escape.”

“But we cannot make sure that they will grant a warrant. I don’t know that I would myself, were I one of the bench. I declare I couldn’t sleep last night for thinking of the story, it is so strange a one; doubt after doubt arose in my mind; and I came to the conclusion, times and again, that there must be some great mistake; that it could not be true.”

“And you don’t mean to go on with it!” resentfully spoke Mrs. Smith. “I’d not have told you all I have, if I had thought that.”

“Softly, ma’am,” returned the lawyer, “I have said nothing of the sort. I do mean to go on with it. That is, I’ll lay the case before their worships, and they can do as they please in it. What I urge is, don’t strike before the iron’s hot. When the subject of the accusation is a man like Mr. Carlton, enjoying the confidence of the town, and the husband of a peer’s daughter, the bench won’t grant a warrant lightly; they must have something beyond mere suspicion.”

“And is there nothing here beyond mere suspicion?” asked Mrs. Smith.

“As you put it — yes. And perhaps the magistrates may consider so. But I say we should be at a great deal more certainty if we could get the copy of the marriage certificate down. I tell you I have

telegraphed for it: that is, I have telegraphed for the register at old St. Pancras Church to be searched. If it's found, that copy will be down here in the course of the morning."

"And if it's not found, sir?" rejoined Mrs. Smith in a blaze of anger. "It's quite a wild-goose sort of chase to search for it at all, in my opinion. She might just as well have been married at any other church in London as at that. The remark she made might have meant nothing. If it had meant anything, I should have seen and suspected it at the time."

"I think it likely that it did mean something. We lawyers, ma'am, are apt to suspect these remarks; at any rate, we sometimes think it worth while to discover if, may be, they have a meaning or not."

"Then I'm thankful that I am not a lawyer," was the retort.

Mr. Drone shrugged his shoulders, as taking the words literally. "It's as pleasant a life as any, for what I see. All callings have their annoyances and drawbacks. But what I wished to point out to you was this; that if that certificate comes down and we can produce it to the magistrates, they will have no loop-hole of excuse; they *must* grant the warrant of apprehension. And as I expect the certificate (if it is in existence) will be down this morning, the application had better wait an hour or two."

"Then, sir, I tell you that I'll not wait the hour or two. No, nor a minute. As soon as the court doors are open and the magistrates on the bench, the application shall be made. And if you don't like to appear and make it, I'll do it myself in person."

It was somewhat strange that Mrs. Smith, with her

phlegmatic temperament, should put herself into this fever of resolute haste. Did she fear that Mr. Carlton would suspect, and slip away? It may be, that she was vexed with herself for not having suspected him before, all the months that he had been visiting, almost daily, at her house. One thing was certain: so entirely was she convinced the past guilt was Mr. Carlton's alone, and so incensed was her feeling against him in consequence, that if she could have genteelly appended the surgeon with one of her silk pocket-handkerchiefs to any convenient beam, she had hastened to do it, and not waited for the delay and intricacies of the law.

Mr. Drone could make nothing of her. Once set upon a thing, perhaps no woman living was more persistently obstinate in having her own way than Mrs. Smith — and that's saying a great deal, you know. The lawyer was not the first man who has had to yield, against his better judgment, to a woman's will; and at eleven o'clock, for the magistrates met late that day, he accompanied her to the court, and requested a private hearing. Their worships granted it, and proceeded to business with closed doors.

Meanwhile Mr. Carlton was going his morning rounds, and chatting amicably with his patients, in complete ignorance of the web that others were tightening round him, utterly unconscious that even then a plot built up by his enemies had begun its operation. Oh, if some pitying spirit would but warn us of our peril, in these hours of danger! Could not one of those, that are said to rap at our tables, come and rap its warning message at our brains? They'd do some good then.

No friendly spirit rapped at Mr. Carlton's. He

paid his visits, driving from one house to another, and returned home rather earlier than usual. The sickness was abating in South Wennok as quickly as it had come on, and the medical men were, comparatively speaking, at leisure again. Mr. Carlton went into the surgery, looked in the visiting book, dotted down a few orders for medicines for Mr. Jefferson to make up when he came in, and at one o'clock went into the dining-room.

Lady Laura was there. It was the first day she had come down-stairs; that is, come regularly to her meals. She was just about to sit down to luncheon, and so very unusual a thing was it for her husband to come in to partake of that meal, that she looked at him in surprise.

"Ah Laura! Down-stairs to luncheon again! I am glad of it, my dear."

He spoke in a cheery, hearty, loving tone; very, very rarely did he speak in any other to his wife. The time was to come when Laura would remember those tones with remorse, and think how she had requited them.

"You are home early to-day," observed Laura, quitting the chair she had been about to take, and drawing nearer the fire while she talked.

"Earlier than I have been lately. Laura, I shall advertise the practice at once now."

"Advertise the practice!"

"I am beginning to dislike this incessant work. And if I don't make an effort some time we shall never get away. How early you went to bed last night!" continued Mr. Carlton, passing to a different topic.

"I was tired," said Laura evasively. In point of fact, she had *not* been tired the previous evening, but angry at Jane's unexplained departure, and had gone to rest early.

"You are letting your luncheon get cold."

Laura gave a side glance at the table and slightly tossed her head. She threw her eyes full at her husband, as he stood opposite to her in the cross light of the front and side windows.

"So that child's dead, I hear?"

"What child?" repeated Mr. Carlton, really not for the moment comprehending, for he was thinking of other things.

"As if you did not know! The child at Tupper's cottage."

"Oh, yes; he died yesterday morning, poor little sufferer! The mother takes on dreadfully," he added, after a pause.

"Will you affirm to me, now that he is lying dead, that the child was nothing to you? You know what I mean."

"No," returned Mr. Carlton, with provoking coolness. "I answered you once on the point, and I thought you were satisfied. If you have been calling up the old fancies again, Laura, you must abide by it; I shall not allow them to trouble me."

Thought she was satisfied! Little did Mr. Carlton suspect how far from "satisfied" she had been! — what a turmoil of jealousy her mind had become since! Laura resumed.

"The mother 'takes on,' does she?"

"She did yesterday morning. I was up there half an hour after the child's death, and I think I never

saw grief so passionate as hers was for the moment. I was astonished. But when these cold, stern natures yield to emotion, it's apt to be strong. I dare say it spent itself long before the day was over."

"I suppose you soothed it for her?"

Mr. Carlton looked quickly at his wife: *was* she bringing up this absurdity again? "Laura!"

"Well?"

"What do you mean?"

Lady Laura's pouting lips and flushed cheeks answered for her, and Mr. Carlton had no need to ask a second time. But the absurdity of the thing, as connected with Mrs. Smith, struck so ludicrously upon Mr. Carlton, that his whole face relaxed into an amused smile.

"Oh Laura! That hard old woman!"

Had he protested for an hour, it could not have opened her eyes to the real absurdity of her doubts more than did those simple words. She looked shyly up at him, her lip quivering. Mr. Carlton laid his hand fondly on her shoulder.

"Need I affirm it to you again, Laura? — that I never had any acquaintance with the woman, on my sacred word of honour? You cannot surely think it necessary that I should repeat it. What delusion can you have been giving way to?"

In truth Laura hardly knew; except that it was one that had blinded her judgment and made her miserable. A conviction flashed into her mind that she had been altogether mistaken; and the chief sensation struggling through all the rest was one of shame, mingled with repentance, for having in this instance unjustly wronged him; for having betrayed

her jealousy to the world, comprising Lady Jane and Judith; for having picked the lock of Mr. Carlton's hiding-places.

She raised her hand, took his from her shoulder, and left her own within it, the tears trembling on her eyelashes. Mr. Carlton bent his face to hers.

"We will soon begin a new life elsewhere, Laura," he whispered. "It shall not be my fault if clouds come between us then."

Laura wiped her eyes and turned to the luncheon table. Two or three tempting little dishes were laid there. Lady Laura liked good living just as much as the earl had liked it. It was her pleasure not to be waited upon at luncheon, and she seized hold of two of the plates, now nearly cold, and held them to the fire. Mr. Carlton took them from her to hold them himself.

"You'll take a bit with me to-day, Lewis?"

"It must be very little," said he, sitting down. "I always make a good breakfast. What's this? Stewed oysters. I'll try one or two of these. Shall I give you some?"

Laura chose to take some. He had just helped her, and was about to put some on his own plate, when the door opened and Jonathan's head came in. It was rather an unusual fashion for a footman to enter a room, and they both gazed at him. The man looked pale; as one scared.

"What is it, Jonathan?" asked his master.

"You are wanted, if you please, sir."

"In the surgery? I'll come in a minute."

"No, sir; now, please," stammered Jonathan, looking more scared with every passing moment.

Mr. Carlton, struck with the servant's manner, rose hastily. The thought which crossed him was, that some accident had been brought to the house. In the hall stood two policemen. Jonathan shut the dining-room door after his master.

Another minute and it was opened again. Lady Laura, curious to know what the wonder was, came to see. The matter-of-fact officers with their impassive faces had closed round Mr. Carlton, one of them showing what looked like a piece of paper, as he spoke in an under-tone; and the servant Jonathan stood apart, with open mouth and staring eyes. The moment Mr. Carlton perceived Lady Laura, he drew the policemen into the opposite room and closed the door.

"Jonathan, what's all that?"

"Goodness knows, my lady," replied Jonathan, swallowing down his breath with a gulp.

"What do those policemen want? You are looking frightened. What did they say? What did you hear?"

"I wish you wouldn't ask me, please," hesitated the man, in his simple good-nature. "It would not do you good to hear it, my lady."

"How dare you refuse, Jonathan?" she imperiously returned. "Tell me instantly."

"Oh, my lady — I heard something about murder, and taking my master before the magistrates for examination."

She did not believe it; she quite laughed at Jonathan. But at that moment they came out again, and Mr. Carlton advanced to her. There was that in his aspect which caused his wife to cower against the doorpost. Or was it that her own vague fears were frightening her?

"Laura, I am going out on business to the town-hall. I shan't be longer than I can help."

Her faint cry resounded through the hall. It seemed such a confirmation of the words spoken by the servant.

"Oh, Lewis, what is it? Jonathan says it is something about murder!"

"Nonsense, nonsense," he peevishly exclaimed. "It is some absurd mistake, which I shall soon set right. Don't be foolish; I shall be home to dinner."

There was no time for more. It seemed but the work of a moment. Mr. Carlton went out and walked up the street, one of the policemen by his side, the other strolling behind.

Utterly bewildered, as much with the suddenness of the affair as anything, Lady Laura gazed around her for some explanation; but all she met was the startled face of Jonathan, not a whit less astounded than that of his mistress. Passionate and impetuous, she dashed out to the front gate, looking after them, as if that would afford her some explanation. It was just what the sailor-earl would have done.

And there Lady Laura became aware of the fact that a genteel mob were attending on the steps of Mr. Carlton and his escorters. The fact was, some version of the affair had got wind in the town, and people were up in arms. More and more astonished, Lady Laura perhaps would have run after them, but she caught sight of Mrs. Pepperfly, who had come into contact with the running mob at the gate, and was not improved in temper thereby. Lady Laura knew the nurse by sight, had occasionally spoken to her, and she seized hold of her arm.

"Tell me what the matter is!" she panted. "You know."

Mrs. Pepperfly's first movement was to go as quick as she could inside the house and pull Lady Laura with her. The old woman shut the dining-room door upon them, leaving poor Jonathan alone in the hall.

"If you don't tell me at once, I shall die," came the passionate appeal. "What is it?"

"It's one of them there ways of Providence we hears on when we has time to go to church," was Mrs. Pepperfly's lucid answer. "To think that we should have lived all these years and never suspected Mr. Carlton! — and him attending of the child every day at Tupper's cottage! But murder will out. Yours is hard lines, my poor lady!"

Lady Laura, in her dreadful suspense, her vehement impatience, nearly shook her. Thought is very quick — and it was only that morning she had heard of the child's death.

"Has *he* been murdered? — that child at Tupper's cottage?"

"He!" responded Mrs. Pepperfly. "Bless your ladyship's dear heart, he went off natural, like a lamb, with his bad knee. It's his unfortunate mother."

"Is *she* dead?" gasped Lady Laura, still more apprehensive ideas arising to her. "She, the woman?"

"Not her," cried Mrs. Pepperfly, jerking her thumb over her shoulder to indicate the locality of Tupper's cottage. "She warn't his mother at all, as it turns out. It were that ——"

"Not his mother!" interrupted Lady Laura; and all the absurdity of her past jealousy seemed to rise up before her in a moment, as it had done just before

"No more nor me," said Mrs. Pepperfly. "It were that other unfortunate, what I nursed my own self, my lady; she as was cut off by the prussic acid in Palace Street, and they do say it were Mr. Carlton that dropped it in. And her name was — oh dear, but it's hard lines for all your ladyships!"

"Her name was what?" asked Laura, with blanched lips.

"Not Mrs. Crane at all, my lady, but Clarice Chesney. That is, Mrs. Carlton; for they say she was his wife."

Lady Laura sank into a chair, terror-stricken, powerless. Mrs. Pepperfly, who was troubled with no superfluous sensitiveness on her own score, and did not suspect that other people were, and who could talk enough for ten if once set going, continued.

"Folks tells of the finger of Fate, and such like incomprehension, but if Fate's finger haven't been in this here pie, it never were in one yet. It have all come to light through a letter, my lady; a letter of Mr. Carlton's, which they say your ladyship found and got out of a place where it had laid for years, and gave it to my Lady Jane Chesney. And that letter have brought it home to him, and the justices had got it right afore their noses when they give the warrant to take him up."

She sat back in her chair, her eyes dilating, her countenance one living horror. She! That letter! Had *her* underhand work, her dishonourable treachery against her husband, brought this to pass? Oh, miserable Laura Carlton! Surely the reminiscence would henceforth haunt her for ever!

"Now, poor dear lady, don't take on so! We all

have to bear, some in our minds, and some in our bodies; and some in our husbands, and some in having none. There ain't nothing more soothing than a glass of gin-and-water hot," added the sympathising Mrs. Pepperfly, "which can be had in a moment, where the kitchen's got a biler in it, always on the bile."

She turned about her rotund person to see if she could discover any signs of the chief ingredient for compounding that restoring cordial. The interrupted luncheon on the table, cold though it was now, looked tempting, as did the long green bottle, which Mrs. Pepperfly supposed contained some foreign sort of wine, and there was a sideboard with suggestive-looking cupboards in it. The old woman talked on, but Laura seemed dead to hearing, lying back with the same glassy stare, and the look of horror on her white face.

"If your ladyship wouldn't object to my ringing of the bell, and asking for a spoonful of biling water from the servants, I'd soon bring the colour back into your cheeks. What a world this might be, my dear lady, if our minds never met with no upsets! I have been upset too with the news, I have, this morning, and ain't recovered yet. And there was that pest of a crowd I got into outside, a poking in of my ribs and a treading of my shins! A quarter of a tumbler of gin-and-water hot ——"

"Come home with me, Laura," interrupted a soft voice, subdued in its grief, "come home with me. Oh, child, this is hard for us all; cruelly hard for you. Let me take you, Laura; my home shall henceforth be yours. Our father seemed to foresee storms for you when he was dying, and left you to me, he said, should they ever come."

Laura rose up, her eyes flashing, her face hot with passion, and stood defiantly before Lady Jane.

"Did *you* denounce him? Did you treacherously show the letter you took away with you? It was well done, Lady Jane!"

Jane bent her sorrowful face, so calm and good in its pity, upon the raging one. "It is not I who have done it, Laura. Denounce your husband? No, I would have carried the secret with me to the grave, for your sake."

Laura sank down again in the revulsion of feeling, and burst into a flood of tears most distressing to witness. She laid her head on her sister's bosom, and openly avowed the part she had enacted, regarding the safe and the skeleton key. Remorse was taking possession of her. And Mrs. Pepperfly, subdued to meekness in her astonishment, dropped a silent curtsy and retired, cruelly grieving over the hot gin-and-water which might have been so near.

CHAPTER XXIX.

The Examination.

SOMEWHERE about the same hour that the arrest of Mr. Carlton took place, or possibly a trifle later, Lady Grey was sitting at work in her house in Savile Row, when a telegraphic despatch was brought in from Great Wennock. She did not open it; it was addressed to Sir Stephen; but she believed she knew what the contents must be, and smiled to herself over her sewing.

"Another excuse for a day or two more with Lucy," she said to her husband when he came in, as she handed him the message.

"Then I shall send Mr. Fred a peremptory mandate," returned Sir Stephen, not feeling pleased. "He ought to have been up a week ago. Halloo! what's this?"

"Great Wennock Station, one o'clock, P.M. Frederick Grey to Sir Stephen Grey, M.D."

"The mystery of the prussic acid is on the point of discovery. Come off at once, if possible. I have heard you say you should like to be present at the clearing. Tell my mother I was right."

Sir Stephen read it twice over and then aloud to his wife. "What a strange thing!" he exclaimed, in the surprise of the moment. "And 'tell my mother I was right!' What on earth does he mean, Mary?"

Lady Grey made no satisfactory answer. She had never spoken of her son's rash, and, as she deemed, unjustifiable suspicion of Mr. Carlton, and she would not speak of it now.

"Shall you go, Stephen?"

"This very moment. There's nothing to prevent me to-day, and I'd go to the end of the world to be proved blameless in the eyes of South Wennock. I hope I shall just catch a train!"

In point of fact, Frederick Grey had been made aware a trifle earlier than the general public, of what was going on before the magistrates, and he had mounted a fleet horse and sent off the telegram to his father. He would not have aided to bring the guilt home to Mr. Carlton; nay, he would have suppressed it had it lain in his power; but if it was to be done, it was well that his father should be present at his clearing.

He rode more leisurely back again; but not very leisurely either, for South Wennock was in excitement to-day. He found the examination of Mr. Carlton already begun, and everybody connected with it deep in the proceedings.

He might have walked on the people's heads in the vicinity of the court; not a tenth portion could get into the small place designated by the grand name of town-hall. Never had South Wennock been in the like commotion; that which had occurred at those past proceedings, connected with the death of Mrs. Crane, was as nothing to this.

But the crowd recognised his right to a place, as the son of the once accused man, Stephen Grey; the justices did the same; and Frederick was politely offered (providing he could get to the spot) about an inch and a half of room on the bench. His uncle John occupied a seat on it; people made much of the Greys that day.

Frederick found the examination tolerably advanced. Mrs. Smith had given her evidence in public, declaring all she knew and all she suspected; for, allow me to tell you, you who are not aware of the fact, that a bench of country justices consults its own curiosity as to what it shall and shall not hear, and sometimes has a very indefinite notion indeed of whether such and such evidence can be legally tendered in law. The justices' own opinion stands for law in many places. Judith Ford was under examination when Frederick entered, and the prisoner, as we are compelled to call Mr. Carlton, perpetually interrupted it, and got into hot squabbles with his defender in consequence. This gentleman was a Mr. Billiter, universally called Lawyer

Billiter by South Wennock. He had been sent for in great haste to watch the case for Mr. Carlton, and was exerting himself to the utmost: they had been intimate acquaintances. Mr. Carlton stood his ground with calm equanimity. He was very pale, but nobody in South Wennock had ever seen him otherwise; and at moments he stirred as if restless. Calm, good-looking, gentlemanly, he appeared little suited to his position in that court.

"I protest against this going on," he was saying for about the fiftieth time, as Frederick Grey edged himself on to the inch and a half of bench. "I protest against this woman's evidence. I say — as I said at the time — that the person who lay ill was a stranger to me; what interest, then, could I —"

"Now, Carlton, I won't have it," interrupted Lawyer Billiter, wiping his hot face. "I declare, if you do ruin your cause in this manner, I'll leave you to it. You be quiet, and trust to me."

"But I did *not* know her, and I shall say it," persisted the prisoner. "I ask what motive —"

"We cannot hear this, Mr. Carlton," at length interposed the bench, tolerant hitherto, but Mr. Carlton was not an ordinary prisoner. "You can make your defence at the proper period; this is only wasting the time of the bench, and can do you no possible good. You must let the witness give her evidence."

The witness looked rather uncertain what to do, what with the gaze of the crowded court, and Mr. Carlton's interruptions. It was evident that Judith Ford was not a very willing witness.

"Go on, witness," said the magistrate. "You looked into the room, you say, and saw Mr. Carlton. What was he doing?"

"He had a small bottle in his hand, sir," replied Judith; "a very little tiny bottle; but that he held it up, right in the light, I should not have been able to distinguish what it was. He was putting the cork into it, and then he dropped it into his waistcoat pocket. After that he took up the other bottle —"

"What bottle?" interrupted Lawyer Billiter, snapping up Judith.

"The other bottle that stood on the cheffonier, close to his hand; it was a bottle the size of those sent in by Mr. Stephen Grey with the night draughts. The cork lay by it, and he took up the cork very quickly and put it into the bottle —"

"You can't swear that it was the bottle and draught just sent in by Mr. Stephen Grey."

"No," said Judith, "but I think it was. I could see that it had a label on it, and it was full of medicine. No other bottle in the house, but that, was full that night, as was testified to by the nurse at the inquest."

"But —"

"Go on, witness," interposed the bench, drowning Mr. Carlton's "but."

"When Mr. Carlton had corked it up," resumed the witness, "he placed it in a corner of the shelf of the cheffonier, in a slanting position, and came out of the room very quickly; so quickly, that I had no time to get away. I went to the side of the landing, and stood against the wall, but —"

"Where he would pass you as he went downstairs?"

"Oh, no, sir, he would not pass me; I was further up, nearer to the bedroom door. He saw me standing

there; at least, he saw my face, and spoke, asking what I was; but I did not answer, and he looked alarmed. While he went back for the light, I slipped into the broom closet by the bedroom."

"But you were not the dark man with whiskers, to whom allusion has been so often made?" exclaimed one of the astonished magistrates.

"Yes, I was, sir; at least I was what Mr. Carlton took to be a man. I had my cheeks tied up with black plush, on account of the face-ache, a piece on each side, and the plush and the frilled black border of my cap looked just like whiskers in the uncertain light."

"But why did you disguise yourself like that?" was the inquiry of the magistrate, when the surprise had in some degree subsided. "What was your motive?"

"I beg your pardon, sir, but I had not meant it for any disguise," replied Judith. "I had no thought of such a thing. My face was in a great pain and much swollen, and Mr. Stephen Grey had told me I ought to tie it up. I had no other motive in doing it. Had I waited for Mr. Carlton to see me when I brought out the light, he would have known who it was."

"This is a most extraordinary avowal, witness!" struck in Lawyer Billiter, who indeed spoke but in accordance with his own opinion and the general feeling. "Pray had you any knowledge of Mr. Carlton previous to this?"

"Not any," was the reply. "I had seen him passing in the street in his carriage, and knew him by sight from that circumstance; but he had never seen me in his life."

"And now, witness, what was your motive for watching Mr. Carlton from the landing on this night, as you tell us you did?"

"Indeed I had no motive," was the earnest reply of the witness; "I did not purposely watch him. When I heard a movement in the room as I got to the top of the stairs, I feared it was Mrs. Crane — as I have stated to you — and I looked in quietly, thinking how very imprudent it was of her. I did not know anybody except Mrs. Crane was up-stairs; I had no idea Mr. Carlton was there. But when I looked in I saw it was Mr. Carlton, and I saw him doing what I have told you. It all happened in an instant, as it were, and he came out before I could well get away from the door."

"And why did you not avow who you were when he asked, instead of getting away?"

"Again I must say that I had no ill motive in doing it," replied the witness. "I felt like an eaves-dropper, like a peeper into what did not concern me, and I did not like to let Mr. Carlton know I had been there. I declare that I had no other motive. I have wished many a time since, when people have been talking and suspecting the 'man on the stairs,' that I had let myself be seen."

"And you mean to tell us that you could go up these stairs and into this closet without Mr. Carlton's hearing you?"

"Oh yes, I had on my sick-room shoes. They were of list; soles and all."

"Did you suspect, witness, that Mr. Carlton was doing anything wrong with the medicine?" asked one of the magistrates.

“No, sir, I never thought of such a thing. It never occurred to me to think anything wrong at all until the next morning, when I was told Mrs. Crane had died through taking the draught, and that it was found to have been poisoned. I doubted then; I remembered the words of greeting I had heard pass between Mr. Carlton and his patient the former night, proving that they were well acquainted with each other; but still I thought it could not be possible that Mr. Carlton would do anything so wicked. It was only at the inquest when I heard him swear to what I knew was false that I really suspected him.”

“It’s as good as a play,” ironically spoke Lawyer Billiter. “I hope your worships will have the goodness to take notes of the testimony of this witness. What she says it most extraordinary, most incredible,” he continued, looking from one part of the packed audience to another; “in my opinion it is tainted with the gravest suspicion. First of all she deposes to a cock-and-bull story of hearing terms of endearment pass between Mr. Carlton and his patient, to whom he had only then been called in as a medical attendant; and next she tells this incredible tale of the bottles! Why should she, above all others, have been seated in the dark in Mrs. Crane’s bedroom that first night? — why should she, above all others, have come stealing up the stairs the second night, still in the dark, just at the particular time, the few minutes that Mr. Carlton was there? This by-play amidst the bottles, that she professes to have witnessed, can only be compared to so many conjuring tricks! How was it, if she did so come up, that the landlady of the house, Mrs. Gould, and the nurse Pepperfly, did not see her? They —”

"I beg your pardon, sir, for interrupting," said Judith. "They were, both times, at their supper in the kitchen; I saw them as I went by; I have already said so."

"Give me leave to finish, young woman," reproved Lawyer Billiter. "I say," he added, addressing the Court collectively, "that this witness's evidence is incomprehensible, it is fraught with the gravest doubt; to a clear judgment it may appear very like a pure invention, a tale got up to divert suspicion from herself. It remains yet to be seen whether she was not the tamperer of the draught — if it *was* tampered with — and now seeks to throw the guilt upon another. Have the goodness to answer a question, witness: if you perceived all this committed by Mr. Carlton, how came it that you did not declare it at the time?"

"I have said," replied Judith, in some agitation — "because I feared that I should not be believed. I feared it might be met in the manner that you, sir, are now meeting it. I feared the very suspicion might be turned upon me; as you are now trying to turn it."

"You feared that your unsupported testimony would not weigh against Mr. Carlton?" interposed one of the magistrates.

"Yes, sir," replied Judith. "I did not really suspect Mr. Carlton until after the inquest, and there was a feeling upon me then of not liking to speak as I had not spoken before: people would have asked me why I kept it in. Besides, I never felt *quite* sure that Mr. Carlton had done it: it seemed so impossible to believe it."

"And, confessing this, you now take upon yourself

to assert that Mr. Carlton was dropping the prussic acid into the draught while you were squinting at him through the door?" sharply asked Lawyer Billiter.

"I don't assert anything of the kind," returned Judith. "I have only said what I saw him do with the bottles; I have said nothing more."

"Oh," said Lawyer Billiter, "you have said nothing more, haven't you, young woman! I think it must strike everybody that you have insinuated more, if you have not said it. Your worships," he added, turning to the bench, "there is not, as it appears to me, a tittle of evidence that ought to weigh against Mr. Carlton. He tells you that the young lady, Mrs. Crane, came here a stranger to him as she did to all others, and there is not a shade of proof that this is untrue; that he ever knew her before. You cannot condemn a man like Mr. Carlton upon the sole testimony of an obscure witness; a servant girl who comes forward with a confession of things that, if true, should have been declared years ago. With the exception of certain words she says she heard pass between Mr. Carlton and the sick lady, there's no evidence whatever that they were not strangers to each other ——"

"You forget the letter written by the lady to Mr. Carlton the night of her arrival," interrupted one of the magistrates, alluding to the unfortunate letter found by Lady Laura, and which had brought on the trouble.

"Not at all, your worship," undauntedly returned the lawyer. "There's no proof that that letter was addressed to Mr. Carlton — was ever in his possession. The woman Smith's story of its having been handed to her by the Lady Jane Chesney, and that

Lady Jane received it from Mr. Carlton's wife, goes for nothing. I might take a letter out of my pocket, and hand it to your worship, saying that the party from whom I received it told me he had had it from the Khan of Tartary; but it mightn't be any the nearer truth for his saying it."

There was a smile in the hall. Mr. Carlton touched his lawyer on the sleeve, and the latter bent to him.

"What letter is it that is in question?"

For it was a positive fact that Mr. Carlton, up to this moment, had heard nothing of the letter. The policemen who arrested him had not mentioned it: and, on his arrival at the town-hall, the proceedings were commenced in so much haste and confusion that he had but a vague idea of the details of the charge. Lawyer Billiter was sent for afterwards; and he gathered his necessary information from others, more than from the prisoner.

"Don't you know about it?" returned the lawyer, in a whisper. "Haven't you seen the letter? Why, it's that letter that has done three parts of the mischief?"

"I have not seen or heard of any letter. Where did it come from?"

"Out of some safe in your cellar, — as I am given to understand. It's an awkward letter, mind you, Carlton," added the lawyer, confidentially, "unless you can explain it away."

"Have they been searching my house?" asked Mr. Carlton, haughtily, answering the only portion of the explanation which had struck him.

"Not at all. I'm not sure that the bench know

how it was obtained yet, except that Lady Jane Chesney lent it to that Mrs. Smith for an hour or two; and her ladyship said she got it from Lady Laura. I met Pepperfly ——”

“But there was no letter in the safe,” interrupted Mr. Carlton, puzzled by the words. “I can’t tell what you mean. Can I see the letter?”

Lawyer Billiter asked permission of the bench, and the letter was handed to Mr. Carlton. To describe his inward astonishment when he saw the letter that he had thought he had burnt years and years before, would be impossible. He turned it about in his hands, just as he had once turned about the torn portion of its copy before the coroner: he read it word by word; he gazed at its faded characters, faded by the hand of Time; and he could not make it out at all. The Court gathered nothing from his aspect, save surprise — surprise that looked genuine.

“I protest — I know nothing of this letter!” he exclaimed. “It is none of mine.”

“It was found in your possession, in a safe that you keep locked in your cellar,” said the bench, who were wiser than Mr. Billiter thought.

“It never was found there,” returned Mr. Carlton, impressively. “I deny it entirely; I declare that I never had such a letter there as this. I thought some false conspiracy must be at work!”

“Don’t you recognise the letter, Mr. Carlton?” inquired the bench, who were deferent to Mr. Carlton yet, and could not address him or treat him as they did prisoners in ordinary.

“How can I recognise a letter that I never saw before?”

"You have seen part of it before, at any rate. You must remember the portion of a letter produced at the inquest on Mrs. Crane. The inference to be drawn now is, that she abandoned that letter in writing it on account of the blot she made, and began this fresh one. The words in the two are the same."

"Are they the same?" rejoined Mr. Carlton. "I had forgotten; it is a long while ago. But to whom was this letter written?"

"You perceive that it is addressed to you?"

"I perceive that my name is on the cover, the envelope. How it got there, or what it all means, I am at a loss to imagine. This letter appears to be written to the lady's husband, not to me, her medical attendant."

"The deduction sought to be drawn from the letter is, that it was written to you as her husband. Of course, that is not yet proved."

"I beg to thank your worship for that admission," volubly spoke Lawyer Billiter. "It is *not* proved. On the contrary, it will not be my client's fault, or mine either, if we do not prove that the whole charge is false, arising, it may be, out of some strange mistake. A more improbable charge was certainly never brought against a medical man. Why should Mr. Carlton deliberately kill a patient — a young lady whom he was called in to attend, a perfect stranger to him? He ——"

"If the greeting, testified to by the witness, Judith Ford, may be believed, she was not a stranger to him, Mr. Billiter."

"True, your worship; but you will scarcely feel inclined, I fancy, to accept that young woman's word

before Mr. Carlton's. I repeat, there's not a shadow of proof, if you put that witness's word aside, that Mr. Carlton had any previous acquaintance with Mrs. Crane. All the probabilities tend the other way; and, without that proof, it is impossible to pursue this charge against him. Mrs. Crane herself spoke of Mr. Carlton as a stranger to her, as she did of the Messrs. Grey. The Widow Gould ——"

It seemed that Lawyer Billiter's eloquence was fated to be perpetually cut short. A noise at the back of the hall caused him to turn angrily. "What was the cause of the noise?" the magistrates as angrily demanded, and they were answered by their clerk, Mr. Drone.

"Some important evidence has arrived from town, your worships."

Important evidence from town! Their worships gazed in the direction of the commotion; everybody else gazed; the prisoner gazed. But all that could be seen was the blooming person of Mrs. Pepperfly, who was making her appearance late, and not altogether steady on the legs. Some policemen were endeavouring to force a way for her through the dense crowd, for they supposed her testimony would be wanted; but their efforts were useless. A slim figure might have been got through, but Mrs. Pepperfly, never. Groaning, exhausted, a martyr to heat, and dreadfully cross, she commenced a fight with those around her as effectually as her crushed state permitted.

But the stir, while it baffled Mrs. Pepperfly, enabled another to get through the mass: a tall, slim young man, who twisted in and out like an eel, and got to the front at last.

He was the important evidence from town; that is, he had brought it with him. After conferring a few moments with Mr. Drone, he took from his pocket-book a folded paper. Mr. Drone inspected it with curious eyes, and then handed it to the waiting magistrates.

It was a copy of the certificate of a marriage solemnised in London, at St. Pancras Old Church, early in the month of July, 1847, between Lewis Carlton and Clarice Beauchamp.

CHAPTER XXX.

The Remand.

THE copy of the certificate of a marriage solemnised at St. Pancras Old Church early in the month of July, 1847, between Lewis Carlton and Clarice Beauchamp.

The magistrates gazed on the document as they sat on the bench, and handed it about from one to another, and glanced at Mr. Carlton. Even so. It was that gentleman's marriage certificate with the unhappy lady of whom he had denied all knowledge, whom — there could be no doubt now — he had destroyed.

The magistrates glanced at Mr. Carlton. A change had come over his face, as much change as could come over so impassive a one, and a fanciful observer might have said that he cowered. He knew that all was over, that any attempt to struggle against his fate and the condemning facts heaping themselves one after another upon his head, would be utterly futile. Nevertheless, he rallied his spirits after the first moment's

shock, and raised himself to his full height — cold, uncompromising, ready to hold out to the last. Of the sea of eyes bent upon him from every part of the crowded hall, he disliked most to meet those of Frederick Grey; he remembered the boy's open, honest accusation of him in the years gone by.

The gentleman who had brought the paper into the hall was called forward and sworn. His name was James Chesterton, he said; he had been articled clerk to Mr. Friar, the solicitor, of Bedford Row, and was with him still, though the term of his articles had expired. In consequence of a telegram received the previous night from Mr. Drone, he had gone the first thing that morning to search the register of old St. Pancras Church, and found in it the marriage of which that certificate was a copy.

"You certify that this is a true copy?" asked the chief magistrate.

"A true copy," replied the witness, "exact in every particular. The clerk who was with me when I copied it said he was present when the marriage took place, and remembered the parties quite well. He had a suspicion that it was a stolen marriage, and that caused him to observe them particularly. The lady——"

"And pray what cause had he to suspect that it was a stolen marriage?" sharply interrupted Lawyer Billiter.

"I asked him the same question," quietly answered the witness. "He said that the parties came to the church quite alone, and the young lady was dressed in every-day clothes. He could not help looking at her, he said, she was so beautiful."

"And that was the clerk, you say?"

"I supposed him to be the clerk; if not the actual clerk, some deputy acting for him."

Lawyer Billiter fired up. He was about to deny that the Lewis Carlton then present was obliged to have been that bridegroom, when he was silenced by the bench. The chief magistrate read the certificate aloud for Mr. Carlton's benefit, and then turned to him.

"Prisoner," said he, — and it was the first time they had called him prisoner — "what have you to say to this?"

"I shall not say anything," returned the prisoner. "If evidence is to be brought against me about which I know nothing, how can I be prepared to refute it?"

"You cannot say that you know nothing of the marriage of which this certificate is a copy. Can you still deny that the unfortunate young lady was your wife?"

There was a pause. It is possible that a gleam of doubt was passing through Mr. Carlton's mind as to whether he could still deny that fact. If so, it might be abandoned as useless. There were certain officials connected with St. Pancras Church still — and he knew it — who could swear to his person.

"If she was my wife, that does not prove that I — poisoned her," he returned, making the pause in the sentence, as put.

"It goes some way towards it, though," said the magistrate, forgetting official reticence in the moment's heat.

The words were swallowed up in a loud murmur that burst simultaneously from many parts of the hall,

and bore an unpleasant sound. It was not unlike a threatening of popular opinion, boding no good feeling to the prisoner. John Bull is apt to be on occasions inconveniently impulsive, and Mr. Carlton was losing his ground.

"Silence!" shouted the chairman, in his anger. "Prisoner," he added, turning to Mr. Carlton as the sounds died away, "if my memory serves me right, you swore before the Coroner at the inquest that you knew nothing of this letter or of its handwriting. What do you say now?"

What could he say, with that certificate lying there? In spite of the high tone he assumed, he stood there a sorry picture of convicted guilt. Just at that moment, however, the fact of the production of the letter was occupying his mind more than anything again, for he believed its resuscitation to be nothing short of a miracle.

"I do know nothing of the letter," replied the prisoner, in answer to the chairman's question. "Some conspiracy must have been got up against me, and I am the victim: it may be cleared yet."

That was the most reasonable acknowledgment they could get from him; but, of course, plain as the proofs were, he was not bound to criminate himself. Lawyer Billiter, whose zeal rose with the danger and the necessity for exertion in his client's cause, talked himself hoarse in the throat, and twisted the evidence of the witnesses into various plausible contortions. All in vain. The case, with the production of that marriage certificate, had assumed altogether a different complexion, and the deferent leniency with which the justices of South Wennock had been at first inclined

to treat Mr. Carlton, was exchanged for uncompromising official firmness

The examination lasted until dark, when candles were brought in: the twilight of a winter's evening steals upon us all too quickly. The town-hall had not yet been improved by gas or lamps — South Wennock was but a slow country place — and there were no means of lighting it, if lights were required, save by candles. Four of them were brought, to be stuck in any place convenient: Mr. Drone's clerk got one on his desk, the acting beadle held another in his hand, and the other two were disposed of where they could be. The hall — or court, as South Wennock was wont to call it — presented a strange view in that vague and glimmering light: the densely packed crowd and their lifted faces, the exciting aspect of those taking part in the proceedings, the hot defiance of Lawyer Billiter's countenance, and the calmly impassive one of the prisoner.

But it was shortly found not practicable to conclude the examination that day, and the magistrates remanded it until the morrow. That would be the final close, and there was not a shadow of doubt on any mind present, including the zealous one of Lawyer Billiter, that Lewis Carlton would then be committed to the county jail to take his trial for the wilful murder of Clarice Beauchamp, otherwise Clarice Beauchamp Chesney, otherwise Clarice Beauchamp Carlton. The various names were being bandied about the court in an undertone in disquisition; carping spirits had already mooted the question — could the young lady have been his real wife in point of law, as she had not been married in the name of Chesney?

"The prisoner is remanded, and the magistrates will meet at ten o'clock to-morrow," came forth the announcement, after the Bench had conferred together for a few moments.

"Of course your worships will take bail," said Lawyer Billiter, boldly.

"Bail!" repeated the magistrates, wondering whether the like demand in a parallel case had ever been made before to a Bench in its senses. "Not if the whole town offered it."

The whole town apparently had no intention of doing anything of the sort. Rather the contrary. A certain portion of it — not the most respectable, you may be sure — were anticipating the pleasure of escorting Mr. Carlton to his place of lodging for the night, and in a manner more emphatic than agreeable.

"Let them get off first, the unwashed ruffians," whispered Lawyer Billiter to Mr. Carlton. "You shall stop here until the coast's clear."

The hall was emptying itself. Gentlemen, whether magistrates, audience, or lawyers, stood in groups to say a word on the disclosed marvels of that day. They were indeed scarcely believable, and half South Wenlock had a latent impression, lying deep in the bottom of their minds, that they should wake up in the morning and find the charge against Mr. Carlton to have been nothing more than a dream. One of that audience, however, gave himself no time to say a word to anybody: he got away with all the speed he could, dashed into the Red Lion, and nearly into the arms of its landlady, who was as excited as anybody.

"Has the omnibus started, Mrs. Fitch?"

"This ten minutes ago, sir."

"There! I feared it would be so. Well, you must let me have a conveyance of some sort, a gig or carriage, anything that will go quick."

"Surely you are not going away to London to-night, Mr. Frederick?"

"Not I. I shall stay now to see this unhappy play out. No, I'll tell you a secret, but don't you go and let it out to the town. I have telegraphed for my father, and expect he will be down by the seven o'clock train. It will be something, won't it, to be cleared in the eyes of South Wennock."

"You expect Sir Stephen down!" she exclaimed, in excitement. "I should think you do want a carriage for him. He shan't come into the town obscurely on a joyful occasion like this — joyful to him. You shall have out that new barouche and pair, Mr. Frederick, and if I had got four horses——"

"Just do be sensible," interrupted Frederick with a laugh. "A barouche and four! you'd not get Sir Stephen into it. Look here, Mrs. Fitch," he added gravely. "If Sir Stephen has cause to rejoice at his own clearing, think how sad the news will be to him for the sake of others! — how intimate he is with some of the Chesney family."

"True, true; soon to be connected with them," murmured Mrs. Fitch. "Well, you shall have the barouche out soberly, Mr. Frederick. And indeed it comes to that, or nothing, this evening, for every other vehicle I've got is in use."

Whether this was quite true, might be a question. Mrs. Fitch hurried off, and the barouche, with a pair of post horses, came out. Too impatient to care much

how he got to Great Wennock, provided he did get there, Frederick Grey jumped in, and was driven off. He would not for the world have missed being the first to impart the tidings to his father.

The train came in, and Sir Stephen with it. "You are grand!" he exclaimed, surveying the barouche and pair as his son hurried him to it.

"Mrs. Fitch had no other conveyance at liberty. At least she said so. Get in, sir."

"And what have you got to say for yourself, young gentleman — hindering so much time down here?" inquired Sir Stephen as they drove back.

"I was coming up to-day, but for something that has happened," returned Frederick. "I'll go back when you go, if you like, sir."

"And what's the business you have brought me down upon? What has turned up?"

"Your exoneration, sir, for one thing, has turned up. I hope the town won't eat you, but it is on its wild stilts to-night. And next, the true delinquent has turned up; if that's not Irish, considering that he has never been turned down, but has been close at hand all the while. He who dropped the prussic acid into your wholesome mixture."

"Dropped it purposely?"

"Purposely, there's no doubt; intending, I fear, to kill Mrs. Crane."

"And where was it done?" again interrupted Sir Stephen, too eager to listen patiently. "Dick was not waylaid, surely, after all his protestations to the contrary?"

"Dick delivered the medicine safely, and what was added to it was added to it after it was in the house;

while the bottle waited in the room adjoining the sick chamber."

"That face on the stairs!" exclaimed Sir Stephen in excitement. "I knew it was no illusion. A matter-of-fact, common-sense man, like Carlton, could not have fancied such a thing. It was her husband, I suppose?"

"It was her husband, sure enough, who tampered with the medicine; but that person on the stairs, a living, breathing person, was not her husband. Father, I know I shall shock you. He who was, it's to be feared, guilty — the husband — was Lewis Carlton."

Sir Stephen roused himself from his corner of the barouche, and stared at his son's face, as well as he could in the starry night.

"What nonsense are you talking now, Frederick?"

"I wish it was nonsense, sir, for the sake of our common humanity. If this tale is true, one can't help feeling that Carlton is a disgrace to it."

"Let me hear the grounds of suspicion," said Sir Stephen when he recovered his breath. "It will take strong proof, I can tell you, Fred, before I shall believe this of Carlton."

Frederick Grey told the story as circumstantially as he knew how. It was scarcely ended when they reached South Wennock. Sir Stephen, whether he believed it or not, was most profoundly struck with it; it excited him in no common degree. It was only fit for a romance, he remarked, not for an episode of real life.

"One of the most remarkable features in it, Frede-

rick, assuming the guilt of Mr. Carlton, is that he should never once have been suspected by anybody!"

"I suspected him," was the answer.

"You? Nonsense!"

"I did, indeed," said Frederick in a low tone. "A suspicion of him arose in my mind at the moment when we stood around Mrs. Crane as she lay dead. And he saw that I doubted him too! Do you remember that he wanted to get me out of the room that night; but Uncle John spoke up and said I might be trusted?"

"Good gracious!" cried Sir Stephen in his simple way, "I can't understand all this. What did you suspect him of?"

"I don't know. I did not know at the time. What I felt sure of was, that he was not *true* in the matter; that he knew more about it than he would say. I saw it in his manner; I heard it in his voice; I was sure of it when he gave his evidence afterwards at the inquest. I told my mother this; but she wouldn't listen to me."

"You must have been a strange sort of young gentleman, Frederick!"

"So Mr. Carlton thought, when I told *him*. You know when he laid that cane about my shoulders, and you assured me, by way of consolation, that I must have brought it upon myself by some insolence? In one sense I had; for I had been telling him that I suspected him of having something to do with Mrs. Crane's death. Lady Jane Chesney heard me say it, for the encounter took place at her garden gate, and she happened to be there. No wonder he caned me. The only marvel to me now is, looking back, that he did not three parts kill me. I know I was too insolent.

But there's something worse than all behind, that I have not yet spoken of."

"What's that?" asked Sir Stephen.

"Well, it's very dreadful: not altogether pleasant to talk about. That first wife, that poor Mrs. Crane, turns out to have been the lost daughter of the Earl of Oakburn."

Sir Stephen felt confounded. "My boy! what is it that you are telling me?"

"Nothing but the miserable truth. She was Clarice Chesney. You may guess what this discovery is, altogether, for Lady Jane. So far, however, Mr. Carlton must be exonerated. From what can be gleaned, it would appear that he never knew she was connected with them, never knew her for a Chesney, — only as Miss Beauchamp, and she married him under that name alone."

"I never heard anything so painful in my life," exclaimed Sir Stephen. "But why should — Frederick, what in the world's all this?"

He might well exclaim! They had turned into the street at South Wennock, and found themselves in the midst of a dense and shouting crowd. The fact was, Mrs. Fitch, who was no more capable of keeping a secret than are ladies in general, had spread the news abroad amidst the public that Sir Stephen Grey was coming in, in a barouche and pair; and she hoped they'd cheer him.

The recommendation was needless. Gathered there to wait for the carriage, the mob broke out with one loud shout of acclamation when it came in sight. "Long live Sir Stephen Grey! Would he ever pardon them for having suspected him? — they'd never for-

give themselves. Health, and joy, and long life to Sir Stephen Grey!"

They pressed round the barouche as they shouted. Sir Stephen was not eaten, but his hands were pretty nearly shaken off. And before he was at all aware of what the mob were about, they had unharnessed the horses, sent them away by the post-boy, and were harnessing themselves to the carriage, squabbling and fighting which and how many should enjoy the honour. In this manner, shouting, hurrahing, and gesticulating, they commenced drawing Sir Stephen towards his brother's.

Frederick did not admire being made much of. He opened the door to leap out, but with that dense mob, extending for some yards round about, it could not be done without danger. He remonstrated, and Sir Stephen remonstrated, but only to draw forth fresh cheers and an increased rate of speed in the transit; so they were obliged, perforce, to resign themselves to their fate, the good-humoured Sir Stephen laughing and bowing incessantly.

Suddenly there was a halt, a stoppage, a summary check to the triumphal car. The mob had come in contact with another mob, who had been waiting all that while round the town-hall for Mr. Carlton to emerge from it. That gentleman, escorted by the whole force of the South Wennock police, consisting of about six, was in front, with the attendant mob dancing around. The two mobs joined voice, and the shouts for Sir Stephen Grey changed into yells of anger.

They were close abreast, the barouche and the prisoner, and neither could stir one road or the other,

for the mob had it all their own way. The few policemen were quite powerless.

"Down with him! Let's seize him! Let's have lynch law over here for once! What right had he, that Carlton, knowing what he'd done, to come into our houses, a-doctoring of our wives and children? Let's serve him out, as he served out her! Here goes!"

Another moment, and Mr. Carlton would have been in their hands, at their cruel mercy, but Sir Stephen Grey rose up to the rescue. He stood on the seat of the carriage and bared his head while he addressed the excited mob; the flaring light from a butcher's shop shining full on his face.

"If you touch Mr. Carlton by so much as a finger, you are not my fellow-townsmen, my own dear old neighbours of South Wennock, and I will never again meet you as such. I thought you were Englishmen! If Mr. Carlton be accused of crime, is there not the law of his country to judge him? You are not the law; you are not his accusers; he has not injured you. My friends in this moment, when you have made me so happy by your welcome, don't do anything to mar it; don't make me ashamed of you!"

"It was he druv you from the town, Mr. Stephen; it was he, with his canting lies again you, made us think ill of you, and turn our backs upon the truest friend we ever had."

"That's not your affair; that's mine; he did not drive you from it. If I forgive and forget the past, surely you can do it. Carlton," he impulsively said, "I do forgive you heartily for any wrong they think you may have done me, and I wish you well, and I

hope you'll get off — that is, if you can feel that you ought to," Sir Stephen added, unpleasant reminiscences of what his son had said intruding into his frank good nature. "I wish you no ill, I'm sure; I wish you hearty good luck. And, my men, as you have undertaken to escort me to my brother's, I desire that you'll go on with me, that I may wish *you* no ill. Come! don't keep me here, perched in the cold."

His half-careless, half-authoritative, and wholly kind tone had the desired effect; the barouche was dragged on again, and the mob, to a man, followed after it, setting up their cheers again.

"Thank you, Sir Stephen," said Mr. Carlton, throwing back the words as he resumed his walk between the policemen.

A minute more, and there was another interruption; of sound, at any rate. A band, whence hunted up on the spur of the moment, the excited South Wennock natives, or perhaps Mrs. Fitch, alone could tell, came into sight and hearing, to welcome Sir Stephen to his own town.

"A band!" he groaned, sinking into the corner of the carriage. "For me! What on earth do they take me for? People must have gone mad to-night."

Frederick could not stand that. He had had enough, as it was. Jumping out at the risk of all consequences, he got away with a laugh, leaving Sir Stephen to make the best of it.

But the band had not come to a proper understanding with itself. In point of fact, it had been enjoying a sharp quarrel. The one half of it being of opinion that the welcoming strains to Sir Stephen should be of a personal character and significance, such

as "See the Conquering Hero comes," the other half holding that the music should partake more of a national nature, and suggested "Rule Britannia." As neither side would give way, each played its own tune, a convenient way of showing independence. The result, as Sir Stephen's ears testified, was unique; the more especially as each division played its loudest, hoping to drown the noise of the adversary.

And thus, amidst cheering, shouting, running, laughing, and remonstrating, Sir Stephen Grey was chaired in state to the house of his brother — Sir Stephen, who had been hunted from the town but a few short years before.

And Mr. Carlton, who had been the original cause of it all, and had certainly done his part in the hunting, was conducted by his attendants to his house of sojourn for the night — a strong place, popularly called in South Wennock the Lock-up.

CHAPTER XXXI.

Mr. Policeman Bowler's Self-Doubt.

THE lock-up in South Wennock was one of the institutions of the days gone by. The new police-station — new, speaking by comparison — was a small, confined place, and remanded prisoners were still conveyed to the lock-up until they should be consigned to the county prison. The lock-up, on the contrary, was a good-sized habitation, containing five or six rooms — one of them an ugly cell enough — and all on the ground floor; for it was built somewhat after the manner of a huge barn, which had been divided into compartments afterwards. The building had never

had any other name than "lock-up" in the memory of South Wennock, and it was situated at the end of the town, near Mr. Carlton's residence.

He (Mr. Carlton) was conducted to this place. In the days gone by he had occasionally been called into it to visit sick prisoners; from his proximity to the spot he was nearly always sent for when a doctor was required, in preference to Mr. Grey, who lived further off. What a contrast, that time and this! The police, deferent to Mr. Carlton yet, but feeling their responsibility, marshalled him into the identical cell spoken of, and bowed to him as he went in. Mr. Carlton knew the room, and drew in his lips, but he said nothing. None but criminals accused of very heinous crimes were ever put into it; it was called "the strong room," and was supposed to be a security against any chance of escape, from the fact of its possessing no windows. In fact, once locked into this compartment, there was no chance of it.

The first thing the police did was to search Mr. Carlton, apologising as they did so for its being the "custom." He offered no resistance; he seemed rather inclined to joke than otherwise. Barely was this done, when Lawyer Billiter arrived and was allowed to be closeted with the prisoner.

"And now," said Mr. Carlton, beginning upon the subject that, to his mind, was the greatest puzzle of all, as he sat down on the only chair the room contained, and the lawyer made himself content with the edge of the iron bedstead, "be so good as tell me in the first place, where that letter came from."

"I did tell you when we were in the hall; it was found in your iron safe."

"That's impossible," returned Mr. Carlton; "it never was in the safe."

"Look here, Carlton," returned the lawyer; "it's of no good mincing matters to me. I can never pull a client out of any mess whatever if I am kept in the dark."

"It is I who am kept in the dark," said Mr. Carlton. "I am telling you the truth when I say that the letter never was in my safe at all, and that its production is to me utterly incomprehensible."

"But it was in your safe," persisted Lawyer Bilitier. "If you did not know of it, that's another matter: it was certainly there; your wife, Lady Laura, got it out of it."

"Lady Laura!"

"The tale is this," said the lawyer, speaking without any reserve, for he could not divest himself of the idea that Mr. Carlton did know the facts. "Her ladyship has had some jealous feeling upon her lately with regard to —; but I needn't go into that. She suspected you of some escapade or other, it seems, and thought she should like to see what you kept in that safe; and she went down one night — only a night or so ago — and got it open, and fished out this letter, and recognised it for the handwriting of her lost sister Clarice. She had no idea of its meaning; she supposed it had got into one of your envelopes by some unaccountable mistake; but she showed it to Lady Jane Chesney, and Lady Jane showed it to the woman Smith. And she, Smith, it is who has done all the mischief."

Mr. Carlton gazed with open eyes, in which there was now more of speculative reminiscence than of

wonder. For the first time it occurred to him that there was a possibility of his having put up the wrong letter that long past night; that he might have burnt the letter from his father, and kept the dangerous one. A strange sort of pang shot through his heart. Was it his *wife*, then, who had been the traitor? — his wife whom he had, in his fashion, certainly loved.

“And Lady Laura made the letter public?” he exclaimed, breaking a long pause. And Mr. Billiter could not help remarking the tone of bitter pain in which the words were spoken.

“Not intending to injure you. She had no idea what the letter could mean; and, as I say, thought it had got into your possession by some mistake. She showed it to Lady Jane only because it was the handwriting of her sister Clarice.”

“I never knew it,” he said, in a dreamy tone; “I never knew it.” But whether he meant that he never knew Clarice was her sister, or that he never knew the letter was amidst his papers, must be left to conjecture. Mr. Billiter resumed.

“Nothing would have been known of the precise manner in which the letter came to light, but for Lady Laura's self-reproach when she found the letter had led to your arrest. Just after you were taken to-day, Mother Pepperfly was at your house — by what accident I'm sure I don't know — and Lady Jane Chesney entered while she was there. Lady Laura broke into a storm of self-reproach in her sister's arms, confessing how she had procured a skeleton key, and picked the lock of your safe, and so found the letter. The fat old woman heard it all, and came forth with it. I met her, and she told me; and it seems the next

she met was one of the police, and she told him, and he went straight up to Drone, and imparted it to him: and that's how it got to the ears of the magistrates. It seems as if the hand of Fate had been at work over the letter," irascibly concluded Lawyer Billiter.

Perhaps the "hand of Fate" had been at work with the letter, though in a different way from what Mr. Billiter meant. He had but spoken in the carelessness of the moment's vexation. What would he have said, had he known how strangely the letter had been preserved, when Mr. Carlton had all along thought it was destroyed?

Nothing more could be done until the morning, and Mr. Billiter wished his client good night. Some gentlemen — former acquaintances — called to see Mr. Carlton: he was not yet abandoned! but the officials declined to admit any one to his presence, save his lawyer, civilly saying it was not the custom at the lock-up. Mr. Carlton was asked what he would like for supper; but he said he preferred not to take any supper, and requested the use of writing materials. They were supplied him, together with a small table to write upon, and the further use of the lamp, which latter favour would most likely not have been accorded to a prisoner of less account. In fact, the police could not all at once learn to treat Mr. Carlton as a prisoner; and perhaps it might be excused to them, considering the position he had, up to the last twelve hours, held at South Wennock, and that he was as yet only under remand.

There was a youngish man who had rather lately joined the force. His name was Bowler. Mr. Carlton had attended him in an illness since, and been very

kind to him, and Bowler was now especially inclined to be deferent and attentive to the prisoner. He entered the room quite late at night, the last thing, to inquire whether the prisoner wanted anything, and saw on the table a letter addressed to the Lady Laura Carlton.

"Did you want it delivered to her ladyship to-night, sir?" asked the man.

"Oh, no," said Mr. Carlton; "to-morrow morning will do. Let it be sent the first thing, Bowler."

So the man left him for the night, double-locking and barring the door, after civilly wishing him good rest: which, under the circumstances, might perhaps be regarded as a superfluous compliment.

It was this same attentive official — and the man really did wish to be attentive to Mr. Carlton, and to soothe his incarceration by any means not strictly illegitimate — who was the first to enter the cell in the morning. He was coming with an offer of early coffee; but the prisoner seemed to be in a fast sleep.

"No cause to wake him up just yet," thought Bowler; "he can have another hour of it. Perhaps he haven't long got to sleep."

He was silently stealing out of the cell again when he remembered the letter for Lady Laura which Mr. Carlton had wished delivered early. The man turned, took it from the table, where it still lay, and carried it to an officer, older and more responsible than himself.

"I suppose I may go with it?" said he, showing the letter. "Mr. Carlton said he wanted it took the first thing in the morning. He ain't awake yet."

The older one laid hold of the letter, and turned

it over and over. Every little matter connected with such a prisoner as Mr. Carlton bore an interest even for these policemen. The envelope was securely fastened down with its gum. If a thought crossed the officer that he should like to unfasten it, and see what was written there, — if an idea arose that it might be in his duty to examine any letter of the prisoner's before sending it out, he did not act upon it.

"You may take it at once," he said.

But policemen, however favourably they may be disposed to prisoners under their charge, are very rarely inclined to forego the comfort of their own meals, where there's a possibility of getting them; and Bowler thought he might just as well eat his roll and drink his coffee before he started, as not. This accomplished over the stove of the lock-up, he went out of that unpopular building, asking a question as he went.

"Am I to wait and bring back any answer?"

"Yes, if there is one. You can inquire."

Mr. Bowler went down the street, stoically self-possessed to appearance, but full of importance inwardly at being the porter of the letter which was hidden from the gaze of public curiosity in a safe pocket. It was a regular winter's morning, a little frosty, the sky dull and cloudy, with a patch of blue here and there. South Wennock street was already alive with early bustle: every soul in the place had resolved to obtain a footing inside the town-hall that day, however unsuccessful they might have been the previous one; and they probably thought that the earlier they got up, the more chance there was of their accomplishing it.

Mr. Bowler went through Mr. Carlton's gate and gave two knocks and a ring at his front door, after the manner of the London postmen. The servant who answered it was Jonathan.

"Can I see Lady Laura Carlton?"

"No," said Jonathan, and shook his head.

With so uncompromising a denial, Mr. Bowler did not see his way quite clear to get to her ladyship and to gratify his own self-importance by answering any questions she might put to him. "Could this be give to her at once, then?" said he; "and say if there's any answer I shall be happy to take it back to Mr. Carlton."

"My lady's not here," said the man. "She's at Cedar Lodge. She went there yesterday evening with Lady Jane."

Mr. Bowler stood a moment while he digested the news. He then returned the letter to its hiding-place preparatory to proceeding to Cedar Lodge. Jonathan arrested him as he was turning away.

"I say, Mr. Bowler, will it turn bad again master, do you think?" he asked, with an anxious face. "If you don't mind saying."

Mr. Bowler condescendingly replied that it might or it mightn't: these charges was always ticklish, though folks did sometimes come out of them triumphant.

With that, he resumed his march to Cedar Lodge, where Lady Laura was. He told his business to Judith, and was admitted to the presence of her mistress. Jane was in the breakfast-room, doing what Mr. Bowler had recently done — drinking a cup of coffee. She had not been in bed, for Laura had re-

mained in a state of excitement all night; now bewailing her husband and reproaching herself as the cause of all this misery; now casting hard words to him for his treachery in the days gone by. There was one advantage in this excitement: that it would spend itself the sooner. Passion with Laura, of whatever nature, was hot and uncontrollable while it lasted, but it never lasted very long.

Calm, gentle, pale, her manner subdued even more than usual with the dark distress that was upon them, what a contrast Jane presented to her impulsive sister! As Mr. Bowler spoke to her, he seemed to have entered into a calmer world. Half that night had been passed, by Jane, with One who can give tranquillity in the darkest moments.

"Mr. Carlton desired that it should be sent to Lady Laura the first thing this morning, my lady," said the man, standing with his glazed hat in his hand. "So I came off with it at once."

Jane received the letter from him and looked at its address. "Is — is Mr. Carlton pretty well this morning?" she asked, in a low tone.

"Mr. Carlton's not awake yet, my lady. He seemed very well last night."

"Not awake!" involuntarily exclaimed Jane, scarcely believing it within the range of possibility that Mr. Carlton could sleep at all with that dreadful charge upon him.

"Leastways, he wasn't awake when I come out of the lock-up," returned Bowler, somewhat qualifying his words. "We often do find our prisoners sleep late in the morning, my lady; some of them only gets to sleep when they ought to be awaking."

Jane could not resist another question. In spite of her long-rooted and unaccountable dislike to Mr. Carlton, in spite of this dreadful discovery, she pitied him from her heart, as a humane Christian woman must pity such criminals.

"Does he — appear to feel it very much, Bowler?" she asked, in a low tone. "To be overwhelmed by the thought of his position?"

"We didn't notice nothing of that, my lady," was the man's answer — and it may as well be remarked that he had been engaged in a little matter of business with Lady Jane Chesney some three or four months before; the son of a poor woman in whom she was interested having got into trouble concerning certain tempting apples in a garden on the Rise. "He was quite brisk yesterday evening when he came in, my lady: there didn't seem no difference in him at all from ord'nary. Of course it have got to be proved yet whether he did it or not."

Jane sighed, and left him to carry the letter to Laura telling him she would bring back the answer if there was any. She had hesitated for a moment whether to give it to her at all, lest it might add to her state of excitement. But she felt that she had no right to keep it back. Who, in a case like this, the law excepted, could intercept a communication between a husband and wife?

Laura — it might be that she had heard the policeman in the house — was sitting up in bed in a dressing-gown, with wild dark eyes and a crimson face. Jane would have broken the news to her gently — that there was a letter from Mr. Carlton — and so have prepared her to receive it; but Laura was not one of those who

submit to be prepared, and she snatched the letter from Jane's hand and tore it open.

"Forgive me, Laura, for the disgrace and wretchedness this trouble will entail upon you. Full of perplexity and doubt as this moment is, it is of you I think, more than of myself. Whatever I may have done wrong in the past, as connected with this matter, I did it for your sake. With the production of the certificate brought forward to-day, it would seem to be useless of me to deny that I married Clarice Beauchamp. But mind! whatever confession I may make to you, I make none to the world; let them fight out the truth for themselves if they can. I never knew her but as Clarice Beauchamp; I never knew that she had claim to a higher position in life than that of a governess. She was always utterly silent to me on the subject of her family and connections, and I assumed that she was an orphan. I admired Miss Beauchamp; I was foolish enough to marry her secretly; and not until I was afterwards introduced to you, did I find out my mistake — that I had mistaken admiration for love.

"How passionately I grew to love you, I leave you to remember: you have not forgotten it. I was already scheming in my heart the ways and means by which my hasty marriage might be dissolved, when she forced herself down to South Wennock. The news came upon me like a thunderbolt; the same spot contained her and you, and in the dread of discovery, the fear that you might come to know I had already a wife, I went mad. Laura, hear me! it is the honest truth, so far as I have ever since, looking back,

believed — that I went mad in my desperation, and was no more accountable for my actions than a mad-man is.

“And there’s the whole. When my senses came to me — and they came the same night — I awoke from what seemed an impossible dream. *All* that could be done then was to guard, if I might, the secret, and to put on an armour against the whole human race, a case of steel that should stand between myself and the outer world.

“It is you, Laura, who have at length brought discovery upon me. Oh, why could you not have trusted me wholly? Whatever clouds there might have been in our married life, I declare upon my honour that they had passed, and any late suspicions you may have entertained were utterly groundless. Had you come honestly to me and said ‘I want to see what you keep in that safe in the drug-room,’ I would have given you the key heartily. There was nothing in the safe, so far as I knew, that you and all the world might not have seen; nothing that could work me harm; for this letter, that it seems you found, I had thought burnt long ago. But, having found the letter, why did you not bring it to *me* and ask an explanation, rather than give it to Lady Jane? surely a husband should stand nearer than a sister! I might not have told you the truth; it is not likely that I should; but I should have explained sufficient to satisfy you, and on my part I should have learnt the inconceivable fact, that Clarice Beauchamp was Clarice Chesney. Now and then there has been something in Lucy’s face — ay, and in yours — that has put me in mind of her.

“But, my darling, if I allude to this — your finding

of the letter — I do it not to reproach you. On the contrary, I write only to give you my full and free forgiveness. The betrayal of me, I am certain, was not intentional, and I know that you are feeling it keenly. I forgive you, Laura, with all my loving heart.

"I could not go to rest without this word of explanation. Think of me with as little harshness as you can, Laura.

"Your unhappy husband,

"L. C."

Lady Jane returned to the policeman. There was no answer then, she said: but bade him tell Mr. Carlton that Lady Laura would write to him in the course of the day.

Mr. Policeman Bowler recommenced his promenade back again. Inclining his head with gracious condescension from side to side, when the public greeted him, as it was incumbent on an officer, confidentially engaged in so important a cause, to do. Half a hundred would have assailed him with questions and remarks, but Mr. Bowler knew his dignity better than to respond, and bore on, his blue body erect, and his glazed head in the air.

Little Wilkes the barber was standing at his shop door and ran up to him; the two were on terms of private friendship, and Mr. Bowler was sometimes regaling himself surreptitiously with supper in the barber's back parlour when he was supposed to be on zealous duty. "I say, Bowler, do tell! Is the hour ten or eleven that the case is coming on?"

"Ten, sharp," replied Bowler. "I'll get you a place if you are there an hour beforehand."

As he spoke the last words, and went on, a slight turning in the street brought him in view of the lock-up. And there appeared to be some sort of stir going on within that official building. A hum of voices could be heard even at this distance, and three or four persons were dashing out of it in a state of commotion.

"What's up?" cried Mr. Bowler to himself, as he increased his speed. "What's up?" he repeated aloud, catching hold of the first runner he met.

"It's something about Mr. Carlton," was the answer. "They are saying he has escaped. There seems a fine hubbub in the lock-up."

Escaped! Mr. Carlton escaped! Mr. Policeman Bowler did the least sensible thing he could have done while a prisoner was escaping; he stood still and stared. A question was rushing wildly through his mind: could he, he himself, have left by misadventure the strong room unbarred?

CHAPTER XXXII.

Escaped.

WHEN South Wennock awoke on that eventful morning, dawning on the remand of Mr. Carlton, the chief thought that occupied people's minds was, how they could best secure a place in the town-hall, by fighting, bribery, or stratagem, to hear the conclusion of that gentleman's examination. Vague reports had floated about the town on the previous evening, of the witnesses likely to be examined; and the name of Mr. Carlton's wife was mentioned for one, as touching the finding of the letter. Half the town scouted the idea; but at least it served to add to the ferment; and as a

matter of course everybody rose with the lark, and got their breakfast over by candle light. It was, you are aware, in the dead of winter, when the days are at the shortest.

Perhaps of all South Wennock, the one to think most of the prisoner in pitying humanity, was Sir Stephen Grey. Few men were possessed of the milk of human kindness as was he. He dwelt not on the past dark story, its guilt and its strategy; he thought of the unhappy detected prisoner, alone in his solitary cell: and he longed to soothe, if possible, his disgrace and suffering by any means in his power. So the first thing Sir Stephen did, after snatching a hasty breakfast at his brother's table, was to put on his hat and go down to the lock-up. This was just at that precise time when Mr. Policeman Bowler was marching home in all self-importance from his errand to Cedar Lodge.

As Stephen Grey gained the lock-up from one quarter, Lawyer Billiter was observed approaching it from another; and the policeman in charge, seeing these visitors, began to think he ought to have aroused his prisoner earlier. He sent one of his staff to do it now.

"Let him get up at once; and you come back and take his breakfast in," were the orders. "And tell him Lawyer Billiter's coming down the street. Good morning, Sir Stephen."

"Well, Jones?" cried Sir Stephen, in his free and affable manner — for the man had been one of the police staff in the old days, and Stephen Grey had known him well, "how are you? A cold morning! And how's Mr. Carlton?"

"He's all right, sir, thank you. I've just sent in to waken him."

"What, is he not awake yet?" cried Sir Stephen, rather wondering.

"Not yet, sir. Unless he has woke since Bowler was in, and that's about three quarters of an hour ago. Good morning, Mr. Billiter!" added the policeman in a parenthesis, as the lawyer entered. "Mr. Carlton, he wrote a letter to his wife last night, and Bowler has stepped down with it. But what he's stopping for I can't make out, unless she's writing a long an —"

"Then you had no business to let Bowler step down with it," interrupted the lawyer sharply. "You should have kept it till I came. Didn't I tell you I should be here the first thing, Jones? You are no more to be trusted than a child!"

"Where's the harm of sending it?" asked Jones, rather taken aback at this rebuff. "It mayn't be quite strict practice to let letters go out unopened, but one stretches a point for Mr. Carlton."

"The harm may be more than you think for," returned the lawyer as hotly as he had spoken the previous day in the hall. "He *will* do things of his own head, and try to conduct his case with his own hands. Look at the fight I had to keep him quiet yesterday!"

"He wrote the letter last night, and asked that it should be taken to her ladyship the first thing this morning," returned the man in an injured tone.

"And if he did write it, and ask it, you needn't have sent it. You might have brought the letter out here and kept it till I came. Who's to know what dangerous admission he may have made in it? I can see what it is: between you all, I shan't find a loop-hole of escape for him."

"Do you think he will escape?" asked Sir Stephen, interrupting the angry lawyer.

"Well, no, I don't, to speak the truth," was the candid admission. "But that's no reason why I shouldn't be let do my best for it. If he does escape —"

Lawyer Billiter was interrupted. The man, sent into Mr. Carlton's cell, made his appearance in a rather strange condition. He came bounding in, and stood with the door in his hand, mouth and eyes alike open, and struggling for breath and words. Mr. Jones saw there was something wrong, and rushed to the strong room.

Two minutes and he was back again, his face very pale. Yes, even the hardened face (in one sense of the word) of Mr. Policeman Jones.

"Mr. Carlton *has* escaped, gentlemen. In spite of us and the law."

And Lawyer Billiter, in his impulse, ran to the cell to regale his eyes with its emptiness, and two or three underlings, having caught the word "escaped," rushed forth from the lock-up, partly as a vent to their feelings, partly from a vague idea of pursuing the prisoner. Sir Stephen Grey followed Jones and the lawyer to the cell.

"Yes, the prisoner had escaped. Not escaped in the ordinary acceptation of that word, as was just then agitating the crowd outside the lock-up, and raising the horrified hair of Mr. Policeman Bowler; but in a different manner. Mr. Carlton had escaped by death.

On the rude bed in the cell lay the inanimate remains of what was once Lewis Carlton, the active,

moving, accountable human being. Accountable for the actions done in the body, whether they had been good or whether they had been evil.

The place was forthwith in a commotion; a far greater one than when the escape was assumed to have been of a different nature. The natural conclusion jumped to was "poison," that he must have had poison of some subtle nature concealed upon his person, and had taken it. The route of the runners was changed; and instead of galloping up by-lanes and other obscure outlets from the town, in chase of the fugitive, they rushed to the house of Mr. John Grey, forgetting that the London physician, Sir Stephen, was already present.

No doctor, however, could avail with Mr. Carlton. He had been dead for several hours. He must have been long dead and cold when Mr. Policeman Bowler had stood in his cell and concluded he was fast asleep; and Mr. Policeman Bowler never overcame the dreadful regret that attacked him for not having been the first to find it out, and so have secured notoriety for himself for ever.

The most cut-up of anybody, to use a familiar term, was Mr. Jones. That functionary stood against the pallet looking down at what lay on it, his countenance more chap-fallen than any policeman's was ever seen yet. Curious to say, that while Bowler took the blame to himself when it was thought Mr. Carlton had escaped by flight, Jones was taking it now.

"To think I should have been so green as to let him deceive me in that way!" he burst forth at length. "'You needn't be particular, Jones,' he says to me with a sort of laugh when I was searching him; 'I've

got nothing about me that you want.' Well, I *am* a fool!"

"And didn't you search him?" cried Lawyer Billiter.

"Yes, I did search him. But perhaps I wasn't quite so particular over it as I might have been; it was his easy manner threw me off my guard. At any rate, I'll vow there was no poison in his pockets: I *did* effectually search them."

Sir Stephen Grey rose up from his examination of the prisoner, over whom he had been bent. "I don't think you need torment yourself, Jones," he said. "I see no trace of poison here. My belief is, that the death has been a natural one."

"No?" exclaimed Mr. Jones with revived hope. "You don't say so, sir, do you?"

"It is impossible to speak with any certainty yet," replied Sir Stephen, "but I can detect no appearance whatever of poison. One thing appears certain; that he must have died in his sleep. See his calm countenance."

A calmer countenance in death it was not well possible to see. The wonder was, that a man lying under the accusation of such a crime could show a face so outwardly calm. The eyes were closed, the brow was smooth, there was a faint smile upon the lips. No sign of struggle, whether physical or mental, was there, no trace of any parting battle between the body and the spirit. Lewis Carlton looked entirely at rest.

"I fancy it must have been the heart," remarked Sir Stephen. "I remember years ago, just before I left South Wennock, I met Carlton at a *post mortem* examination. It was over that poor fellow, that milk-

man who dropped down dead in the road; you must recollect, Jones. And in talking of things, Carlton casually remarked to me that he had some doubts about his own heart being sound. How strange that it should occur to me now; I had quite forgotten it; and how more than strange that I should be the one, of all others, first to examine *him!*"

"Poor fellow!" exclaimed Lawyer Billiter, gazing on the still countenance. "There's something very awful in these sudden deaths, Sir Stephen, whether they proceed from — from one cause or another."

Sir Stephen bowed his head. They quitted the cell, locking the door. Mr. Jones proceeded to deal with the intruders filling the outer room, and Sir Stephen went to carry the news to Cedar Lodge. Bowler had said that Lady Laura was there.

The first to come to Sir Stephen was Lucy. Weak with her recent illness, the shock of this dreadful business was unnaturally great; since the night of Judith's narrative she had been in a sad state of excitement; and she fell sobbing into Sir Stephen's arms.

"Hush, child, hush! This is hard for you. Brighter days may be in store, Lucy."

"But think what it is for Laura! And for Mr. Carlton himself. Laura has had a letter from him, and he says he was mad when he did it. He must have been, you know; and we can't help pitying him!"

How like Laura Carlton! how like the impulsive openness of the dead sailor-earl! Who else would have made *any* of the contents of that letter public? Laura had relieved her feelings by a storm of passionate sobs after reading it, and had then lifted her head from her wet pillow to speak its information aloud.

Jane came in. "I heard you were at South Wennock," she faltered, as she shook hands with Sir Stephen. "What a dreadful blow this is to us! And — the consequences have to come," she added, dropping her voice. "If the worst supervenes, Laura will surely never live through the disgrace."

He knew to what she alluded. Sir Stephen leaned towards her. "There will be no further disgrace, Lady Jane," he whispered. "I have come up to tell you."

She paused a moment, supposing Sir Stephen did not understand. "He will be committed — as we hear — to-day for trial, Sir Stephen. And the result of that trial — we, of course, know only too well what it may be. Nothing can save him from standing his trial."

"One thing can, my dear lady. Nay — no, I was not meaning his escape by flight, as was first assumed down there" — nodding his head in the imaginary direction of the lock-up; "in these days of security that escape is next to impracticable. There is another sort of escape over which human laws have no control."

Jane sat breathless; silent; half divining what he had to tell.

"I am a bad one at preparing people for ill tidings," cried Sir Stephen; "my brother John and Frederick are worth ten of me. But — always setting his poor, unhappy self aside — my news must be good for you and Lady Laura, harsh and cruel as it may seem to say it. Mr. Carlton is dead, Lady Jane."

"Dead!" she repeated, as the dread fear of what its cause might be arose to her, and every vestige of colour forsook her trembling lips.

"No, I don't think there's any fear of that; I don't, indeed; I can find no trace whatever of any cause, and therefore I fancy it must have been heart disease. Violent mental emotion will bring that on, you know, Lady Jane, where there's a pre-disposition to it."

"Yes," she answered, mechanically, hearing nothing, seeing nothing still, but the one great fear. Had Mr. Carlton been her husband, Jane would have passed out her future life in praying for him.

"Do you know whether he suspected, of late years, that he might be subject to it?"

"To what?" she asked, striving to collect herself.

"Any affection of the heart."

"I never heard of it; never. If it was so, I should think Laura would know of it."

Poor Laura! How were they to break the tidings to her? She was the most uncertain woman in existence. One moment her mood was of intense bitterness towards Mr. Carlton, the next it had changed, and she was weeping for him, bewailing him with loving words, reproaching herself as the cause of all the present misery. Jane went in, wishing anybody else had to undertake the task. Laura's frantic attacks — and she was sure to have one now — were so painful to her. She found Laura in bed still; her head buried in the pillow, her sobs choking her, and Mr. Carlton's dying letter — it might surely be called such — clutched in her hand. Jane sat down by her side in silence, until calmness should supervene; it would be better to break the news when Laura was physically exhausted; and Jane waited, — her own heart aching. Sir Stephen would not quit the house until the news was broken.

Jane Chesney had always been of a thoughtful

nature, striving to do her duty in whatsoever line it lay before her; and, though she had not been without her trials — sore trials — she had learned that great boon, a peaceful conscience: she had learnt that far greater boon, better than any other that can be found on earth — perfect trust in God.

Later in the day the official medical examination was made of the remains of Mr. Carlton; and, strange to say, the cause of death continued to be unknown. No sign of poison of any nature whatever could be traced; no symptom of anything amiss with the heart. If he had really taken poison, it was of too subtle a nature to be discovered; if he had died from natural causes, nothing remained of them to show. It might be possible that mental excitement had suddenly snapped the chord of life. If so, it was a singular fact; but the problem was one that would never be set at rest.

The first startling shock of the death subsided, South Wennock awoke to the fact that it was a particularly ill-used place, in being cut off from all future revelation on the past affairs of Mrs. Crane — as we may as well call her to the end. That second day's examination at the police court and the subsequent trial, had been looked forward to by South Wennock as a very boon in life's dull romance; and for Mr. Carlton to go off in the sudden manner he had done, balked their curiosity nearly beyond bearing. There were so many points in the past history that would never now be cleared up.

They could not be cleared up for others, who owned a nearer interest in them than South Wennock. There was one particular that would remain a puzzle to Jane

Chesney for ever — why Clarice had not married in her full name. She could understand her keeping the marriage a secret from her family, knowing their prejudices on the score of birth, and that Mr. Carlton was then not even well established in practice, and was scarcely justified in marrying at all; but she could not understand why Clarice should have concealed her true name and family from her husband. It was impossible, of course, that the slightest doubt could have occurred to her of its affecting the legality of the marriage; but what reason was there for suppressing her name at all? Jane could only come to one solution, and that a poor one: that Clarice thought it best to suppress it in all ways until Mr. Carlton should be doing well, then she would say to him, I was not Miss Beauchamp, I was Miss Chesney, grand-niece to the Earl of Oakburn, and we will go and declare ourselves. It might have been so, for Clarice had a world of romance within her. Again, there was that oath she took in a moment of wildness, not to tell her name; was it possible that she deemed it binding upon her for ever? Mr. Carlton's motive for concealing his marriage will have been gathered from certain passages at the commencement of the history: he stood in awe of his father. Mr. Carlton the elder had set his face entirely against his son's marrying, and Lewis was dependent upon him. Men do not in general — at least, educated men, like Mr. Carlton — plunge into crime all at once. When Mr. Carlton grew to think of a marriage with Miss Beauchamp, he sounded his father on the subject, stating at the same time that the lady, though every inch a lady, was only a governess. Had Mr. Carlton the elder lent a favourable ear, all the dark future

might have been avoided; for the marriage would have taken place openly. But he did not. Whether the word governess offended him, certain it was, that he was unnecessarily austere and bitter, quietly assuring his son that he should disinherit him; and Mr. Carlton knew only too well that his father was one to keep his word. Once married, of course there was every necessity for their keeping the fact a secret; and Clarice Carlton seconded her husband. How little did either of them foresee what it would lead to! Link the first link in a chain in deceit, and no living being can tell to what length it will go, or how it will end.

Some slight compensation to South Wennock was afforded by the funeral of the little boy. For the excitement attendant on that ceremony was so great, as to operate as a sort of balm to the previously disappointed feelings. Everybody turned out to witness it. All who had had anything to do in the remotest degree with the past tragedy deemed themselves possessed of a right to follow the coffin at a short or a long distance. Mrs. Pepperfly, Mrs. Gould, even Dick, Mr. Grey's surgery boy of yore, now converted into a rising market gardener nearly six feet high, were amidst the uninvited attendants. It was a fine morning, the day of his burial; the air clear and cold. Mrs. Smith walked next the coffin; for she would resign that place to none. Lady Jane Chesney had intimated a wish to bury the child — that is, to be at the expense; and had that lady intimated a wish to bury *her*, Mrs. Smith could not have shown herself more aggrieved. The child had been as her own all its life, she resentfully said, and, at least, she thought she had earned the right of buying him his grave. Jane

acquiesced, with an apology, and felt sorry she had spoken. The funeral moved down the Rise from Blister Lane, passing Mr. Carlton's residence, where all that remained of him lay, having been removed there from the lock-up, until he should be interred. The Law had not cared to keep possession of his body when the spirit had flown. Yes; they carried the little coffin past the house where the dead lay; carried it to St. Mark's Churchyard, to the side of the ill-fated mother, who had lain there so long in its quiet corner, and they buried the child by his right name, Lewis George Carlton.

Sir Stephen Grey and his son returned to London together. Lady Grey knew nothing of the events recently enacted, and they imparted them to her. She could not overget her shock of astonishment.

"What do you say to my boyish fancy, now, mother?" asked Frederick. "Did I wrong Carlton?"

"Hush!" she said. "It seems to me to savour of that faculty told of as pertaining to Scotland — second sight. Oh, Frederick, how could Mr. Carlton *live*, knowing what he had done?"

"Poor fellow!" spoke Frederick, as impulsively as Sir Stephen himself could have said it. "Rely upon it, he must have paid the penalty of the crime, over and over again. He could not have existed but in the constant dread of discovery; he was not without a conscience. And what must that have been to him, with the scarlet letter 'M' ever eating into his breast?"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

[The Turbulent Waves laid to Rest.]

THE time rolled on. Another year was in, and its months glided away until the autumn. It had been no eventful year, this: rather too much of event had been crowded into the preceding one, and this was calm — so calm, as to be almost monotonous. The storm had spent itself, the turbulent waves had laid themselves to rest.

Lady Oakburn had returned from the Continent as soon as she heard of the trouble connected with Mr. Carlton, travelling in the dead of winter; and Lucy Chesney quitted South Wennock for her own home. The marriage with Frederick Grey had been postponed; it was to have taken place in the spring, but all parties united in agreeing that it might be more seemly to delay it until the autumn.

Laura had remained with Jane. Lady Oakburn had asked her to come to her, and make her house her home. Many friends had stepped forward, and pressed her to come and pay them as long a visit as she liked; but Laura had chosen to stay with Jane, very much, it must be confessed, to Jane's own surprise. For a few short weeks Laura's grief had been excessive, which grief was intermixed, as before, with moments of anger against Mr. Carlton for the disgrace he had brought upon himself; but all that wore away, and Laura gradually grew very much her old self again, and worried Judith nearly to death with her caprice, mostly as touching the ornaments and trimmings of her black dresses.

They sat together, Jane and her sister, on a bright morning in September. Laura was in a petulant mood. Her pretty foot, peeping from underneath the crape of her dress, tapping the carpet impatiently; her widow's cap, a very marvel of tasty arrangement, was just lodged on the back of her head. The recent bugbear of Lady Laura's life had been this very article of widow's attire — the cap; it was the cause of the present moment's rebellion. Laura had grown to hate the cap beyond anything: not from any association with the past it might be supposed to call up, but simply as a matter of personal adornment; and she believed Jane to be her greatest enemy, because she held to it that Laura could not, and must not, throw the caps off until a twelvemonth had elapsed from the death of Mr. Carlton.

And yet Laura need not have been afraid of the cap; a more lovely face than her's, as it looked now, with her rich hair braided, and the white crape lappets thrown back, it is impossible to conceive. The present trouble was this: Laura would not go up to Lucy's wedding, now about to take place, unless she could leave the odious caps behind her. Jane assured her it would not be proper to appear without them.

"Then I will not go at all," Laura was saying with pouting lips. "If I can't appear before people but as a guy, I'll stay where I am. How would you like being made into an old woman, Jane, if you were as young as I am? Why don't you take to the caps yourself, if you are so fond of them?"

"I am not a widow," said Jane.

"I wish you were! you'd know what the caps are, then. They never could have been invented for any-

body on this side fifty. And their heat is enough to give one brain-fever."

"Only three months longer, Laura," said Jane, soothingly, "and the twelvemonth will have expired. I am *sure* you would not like to leave them off sooner yourself."

"Where's the good of them?" sharply asked Laura. "They don't make me regret my — my husband either more or less. I can mourn him if I please without the cap as much as I can with it: and they are ruin to the hair! Everybody says it is most unhealthy to keep the head covered."

"But you don't cover yours," Jane ventured to remark, as she glanced at the gossamer article perched on the knot of hair behind.

"No, but you'd like me to. Why should you hold out for the wretched things, Jane? My belief is, you are jealous of me. It's not my fault if you are not handsome."

Jane took it all meekly. When Laura got into this temper, it was best to let her say what she would. And Jane thought she talked more for the sake of opposition than anything, for she believed that Laura herself was sufficiently sensitive to appearances *not* to quit the caps before the year had gone by.

But the result was, that Lady Laura did not go to London to the wedding. Perhaps she had never intended to go. Judith thought so, and privately said so to her mistress. The following year Laura was to spend with Lady Oakburn — the heavy widow's silks and the offending caps left behind her at South Wrenock; and Judith felt nearly sure that Lady Laura

had not meant to show herself in town until she was divested of these unbecoming appendages.

So Jane went alone, getting there on the day only before the wedding. Judith as usual was with her; and this was another grievance for Laura — to be left without a maid. In a fit of caprice — it must be called such — Lady Laura had discharged her own maid, Stiffing, at the time of Mr. Carlton's death, protesting that old faces about her only put her in mind of the past; and Judith had waited upon her since.

The rest of Mr. Carlton's establishment had been broken up with the home. But Lady Jane would not go to town without Judith, and my Lady Laura had to do the best she could. It may as well here be mentioned that the money left to Clarice by the Earl of Oakburn, and which had since been accumulating, Jane had made over in equal portions to Laura and Lucy, herself taking none of it.

It was a cloudless day, that of the wedding — cloudless in all senses of the word. The September sky was blue and bright, the guests bidden to the ceremony were old and true friends. Portland Place was gay with spectators; carriages dashed about; and Lady Jane seemed to be in one maze of whirl and confusion until she was quietly seated at the breakfast-table.

Man and wife for ever! They had stood at the altar side by side, and sworn it faithfully, earnestly, with a full and steadfast purpose in their hearts and on their lips. Not until they were alone together in the chariot, returning home again, could Frederick Grey realise the fact that she was his, as she sat be-

side him in her young beauty, her true affection — every pulse of her heart beating for him.

There was nothing in the least grand about the wedding, unless it was Jane's new pearl silk of amazing rustle and richness, and a gentleman in a flaxen wig and a very screwed-in waist, who sat at Lady Oakburn's right hand at the table. He was Lord something — a tenth cousin or so of the late earl's; and he had condescended to come out of his retirement and gout, to which disorder he was a martyr — it ran in the Oakburn family — to give Lucy away. John Grey and his wife were up, and the Reverend Mr. Lycett, now the incumbent of St. Mark's Church at South Wennock, had come to read the marriage ceremony — they were all visiting Sir Stephen and Lady Grey.

It was the first time Jane had seen Sir Stephen since the previous December. She thought he looked worn and ill, as if his health were failing; she thought, as she looked at him, that there might be a fear the young M. D. opposite to her by Lucy's side might become Sir Frederick sooner than he ought to do in the natural course of age. But Sir Stephen made light of his ailments, and told Jane that he was only knocked up with too much work. He was merry as ever; and said now that Frederick was making himself into a respectable member of married society he should turn over the chief worry of the patients to him, and nurse himself into a young man again. "Do you know," he cried in a whisper, in Jane's ear, his merry tone changing, "I'm glad Lady Laura did not come. The sight of her face here to-day would have put me too much in mind of poor Carlton."

Of course the chief personage at the table was the young Earl of Oakburn. The young earl had planted himself in the seat next to Lucy, and wholly declined to quit it for any other. There, with Pompey behind his chair (who was a verier slave to the young gentleman than ever he had been to Captain Chesney), and his hand in Lucy's, he made himself at home.

"I am so glad to see how Frank improves!" Jane remarked to Sir Stephen. "He looks very much stronger."

"Stronger!" returned Sir Stephen, "he's as strong as a little lion; and would have been so long ago but for his mamma and Lucy's having coddled him. Mind, Lucy! if you attempt to coddle your own boys when they come, as you and my lady have coddled Frank, I shall put a summary stop to it. I shall; and so I give you fair warning."

Sir Stephen had not thought it necessary to lower his voice. On the contrary it was considerably raised, as he bent his face forward towards Lucy on the opposite side of the table. A fair picture, she; with her flowing white robes, her bridal veil and wreath, and the pretty gold ring upon her finger. One startled glance at Sir Stephen, as he spoke, and then she sat motionless, her eyelids drooping on her crimson cheeks. Frederick, by her side, threw his eyes at his father, half amused, half indignant.

"You may look, Dr. Grey, but you won't look me out of it," nodded Sir Stephen. "I shall claim as much right in the young Turks as you and Lucy, and I promise you they shan't be coddled."

"Meanwhile, Sir Stephen," interposed the countess,

with a laugh, "Lady Jane is sitting by you with nothing to eat."

"I beg Lady Jane's pardon," said Sir Stephen, gaily. "But they'll want keeping in order, those two, and it is well to let them know there's somebody to undertake it. What do you say you want, Frank?"

"I want a piece of wedding cake," responded Frank.

"Now I do protest against that. You must eat some meat first, Frank, and the cake afterwards. I know how it is when cake is begun upon: there's no room left for good, strengthening meat. Cakes, and sweets, and trash! all that comes of coddling. Mind, Lucy, I will not allow cakes or —"

"I am not coddled," interrupted Frank, opportunely. "And mamma says I shall soon go to Eton."

"The very best place for you," cried Sir Stephen. "I hope it's true."

"Oh, it's true," said Lady Oakburn. "He is strong enough for it already, Sir Stephen: in spite of the coddling," she added, with a smile.

"Thanks to me, my lady, for keeping the coddling within bounds. Judith! that's never you in that white topknot!"

Judith laughed, turned, and curtsied. The white satin bow on her cap was as large as the coachmen's favours. Judith was waiting at the chocolate table, her hands encased, perhaps for the first time in Judith's life, in delicate white kid gloves.

"Why can't Lucy come back to-night?" suddenly demanded the young earl, appealing to the table generally.

"Because Lucy's mine now, and I can't spare her,"

whispered Frederick Grey, leaning behind Lucy to speak.

An indignant pause. "She's not yours."

"Indeed she is."

"You have not bought her!"

"Yes I have. I bought her with the gold ring that is upon her finger."

Lord Oakburn had seen the ring put on, and sundry disagreeable convictions arose within him. "Is she quite bought?" he asked.

"Quite. She can't ever be sold back again."

"But why need she go away? Can't you let her stop here?"

"I'm afraid I can't, Frank. She shall come and see you soon."

Upon which his lordship burst into a cry, and rubbed his wet cheeks until he was a sight to be seen. Pompey surreptitiously filled his ears with soothing words, and his hands with wedding cake and bonbons.

About ten days after this, Frederick Grey and his wife were at South Wennock. It had been arranged that they should pay Jane a short visit before returning to town to take possession of their new home.

There had not been many changes at South Wennock. The greatest perhaps was at the late house of Mr. and Lady Laura Carlton. It had been converted into a "Ladies' College," and the old surgery side-door had got a large brass plate on its middle, "Pupils' Entrance." The Widow Gould flourished still, and had not yet ceased talking about the events of the previous December; and Mrs. Pepperfly was decidedly more robust than ever, and had been in very

great request this year from her near connection with the events which had brought to light the tragedy. Mrs. Smith had gone back to Scotland. She had a tie there, she said — her husband's grave.

Just as they had been sitting nearly a fortnight before, so they were sitting now, the ladies Jane and Laura. Laura, in spite of her cap and her widowhood, had contrived to make herself look very charming, almost as much so as the fair young bride, who ran in to them from the carriage, radiant with happiness.

But Lucy's gaiety, and her husband's also, faded down to a sort of timid reserve at the sight of Laura. It was the first time they had met since the enacting of the cruel trouble, and it was impossible but that their minds should go back to it. Laura noted the change of manner, and resented it according to her hasty fashion, taking some idea into her head that they considered she ought to be treated with grave sobriety in her character of widow; while she did not think so at all.

They had arrived in time for a late dinner, and in the evening Frederick said he would just run down as far as his uncle's. Somehow it had been a dull dinner; try as Frederick and Lucy would, they could *not* divest themselves of the impression left by the past, in this first interview with Mr. Carlton's wife. Laura, in a pet, went up-stairs early.

"Jane, how well Laura is looking!" were Lucy's first words. "I had not expected to see her half so well, and all her old light manner has returned. Has she forgotten Mr. Carlton?"

"Quite sufficiently to marry again," replied Jane, somewhat heedlessly. The words shocked Lucy.

"Oh, Jane! *Marry* again — *yet!*"

Jane looked up and smiled at the mistake. "I did not mean that, Lucy; of course not. But I should think it an event not unlikely to happen with time. She said one day that she would give a great deal to be able to put away the tarnished name of Carlton. She is young enough still, very good-looking, of good birth, and upon *her*, personally, there rests no slur; altogether, it has struck me as being probable. Next year, which she is to pass with Lady Oakburn, she will be in her element — the world."

"Jane," said Lucy, awaking from a reverie, "I wonder *you* never married."

A tinge of red came into Jane Chesney's cheeks, and her drooping eyelids were not raised.

"I think it must have been your own fault."

"You are right, Lucy," said Jane, rallying; "I was so near being married once that the wedding-day was fixed. I afterwards broke it off."

"Whatever for?" exclaimed Lucy, in impulsive curiosity, as the thought occurred to her how very grievous a catastrophe it would have been had *her* wedding been broken off.

"We were attached to each other too," resumed Jane, in the tone of abstraction which proved her mind had gone back to the past and was absorbed in it. "He was of good family, as good as ours, but he was not rich, and he was hoping for a Government appointment. We were to have married, however, on what he had, and the wedding-day was fixed. Then came mamma's illness and death, which, of course, caused the marriage to be postponed. Afterwards he got his appointment, it was in India; and then, Lucy,

came the bitter trial of choosing between him and my father. My mother had said to me on her death-bed, 'Stay always with your father, Jane; he will be lost without you when I am gone,' and I promised. She did not know William would be going abroad."

"And you gave him up to remain?"

"Yes, I thought it my duty; and I loved papa almost as well, in another way, as I loved him. There was a little creature in my care also, besides: you, Lucy."

"Oh, I am so sorry," exclaimed Lucy, clasping her hands; "you should not have minded me."

Jane smiled. "I got over it after a time; and, Lucy, do you know, I think it likely that I am best as I am."

"Where is he now, Jane? Perhaps he may come home yet and marry you!" And Jane laughed outright, Lucy's tone was so eager.

"He has had a wife a great many years, and I don't know how many children. Lucy, dear, my romance wore itself out long ago."

"But it must be so dreadful a thing to have your marriage broken off," said Lucy, in a half whisper; "I think it would have killed me, Jane."

"Very dreadful indeed it must seem to you, no doubt, in these early days," said Jane; "but, my dear, people don't die so easily as that."

Lucy had turned scarlet: was Jane laughing at her? She began to speak of something else.

"Jane," she said, dropping her voice, "was it not a singular thing that you and papa — and myself a little — took that strange dislike to Mr. Carlton?"

"It must have been instinct, as I believe."

"While Laura and — I suppose — Clarice, became so greatly attracted by him. It strikes me as being very strange. Oh, what an unhappy thing it was that Clarice ever went away from home."

"All the regret in the world will not mend it now; I strive not to think of it. I never — as a matter of course, Laura being here — talk of the past. Lucy," she added, drawing her young sister to her; "I can see that you are happy."

A bright smile and a brighter blush answered the words.

"My child, take a caution from me," proceeded Jane; "have no concealments from your husband, and never disobey him."

"There is no need to tell me, Jane," said Lucy, with some surprise; "how could I do either?"

"No, I believe there is none; but we cannot forget, my dear, that concealment or disobedience, following on their rebellious marriages, brought the ill upon Laura and Clarice. Had not Clarice come to South Wennock, in all probability her tragical end would never have occurred, and she came in direct disobedience to the will and command of her husband. Had Laura not gone in dishonourable secrecy, forcing her husband's private locks, the awful disclosure might never have burst upon her. Be you cautious, Lucy; love, reverence, and obey your husband."

A conscious smile played around Lucy's lips, and at that moment Judith came in. Lady Laura wanted her sister Jane.

"It does not seem like the old room, Judith," Lucy said, as her sister quitted it; "I should scarcely have known it again."

For it was a very smart drawing-room now, and somewhat inconveniently crowded with ornaments and furniture. Laura's handsome grand piano took up a good portion of it.

"True, my lady," was Judith's answer; "when the sale took place at Mr. Carlton's after his death, Lady Laura reserved a great many of the things, and they had to be brought here."

"Where's Stiffing?" asked Lucy.

"She soon found a place after Lady Laura discharged her, but she did not remain in it, and she has left South Wennock. She got mobbed one evening," added Judith, dropping her voice.

"Got mobbed!" echoed Lucy, staring at Judith.

"It was in this way, my lady: the news got abroad somehow that it was Stiffing who fetched the skeleton key for Lady Laura, that — that black night, and a number of rude boys set upon Stiffing one spring evening; they hooted her and pelted her and chased her, called her a skeleton, and altogether behaved very badly."

"But if she did fetch the key, Lady Laura sent her for it."

"Oh yes, but boys and men, when they set upon a body like that, my lady, they only think of the victim before them. Stiffing wouldn't stop in South Wennock after that, but gave up her place."

"How shamefully unjust!" exclaimed Lucy.

Her indignation had scarcely spent itself when Frederick Grey entered, and Judith retired.

"Did you think I was lost, Lucy?"

"No, I began to think you were long; I suppose you could not get away?"

"That's how it was. John's young ones hid my hat, in fact; and Charles Lycett and his wife were spending the evening there. I don't know what good wishes for luck they don't send to Lady Lucy Grey," he added, drawing her before him, and keeping his hands on her waist.

Lucy laughed.

"What brings you alone?" he asked. "Where are they?"

"Laura went up-stairs to bed, and just now she called Jane. Frederick, Jane has been giving me a lecture."

"What about?"

"She bade me love and reverence you always," she whispered, lifting her eyes momentarily to his. "I told her the injunction was not needed: do you think it is?"

He snatched her closer to him: he covered her face with his warm kisses.

"Once, in this room — I have never told you, Frederick — I passed some miserable hours. It was the night following the examination of Mr. Carlton; of course it was altogether miserable enough then, but I had a fear on my own score, from which the others were free: I thought the disgrace would cause you — not to have me."

"Oh, you foolish child! you thorough goose! Lucy, my darling," he continued, in an altered tone, "you could not really have feared it. Had disgrace attached itself to every relative you possessed in the world, there would only have been the greater happiness for me in shielding you. My wife, you know it."

She looked at him with the prettiest smile and blush ever seen, and he released her suddenly, for Jane came in.

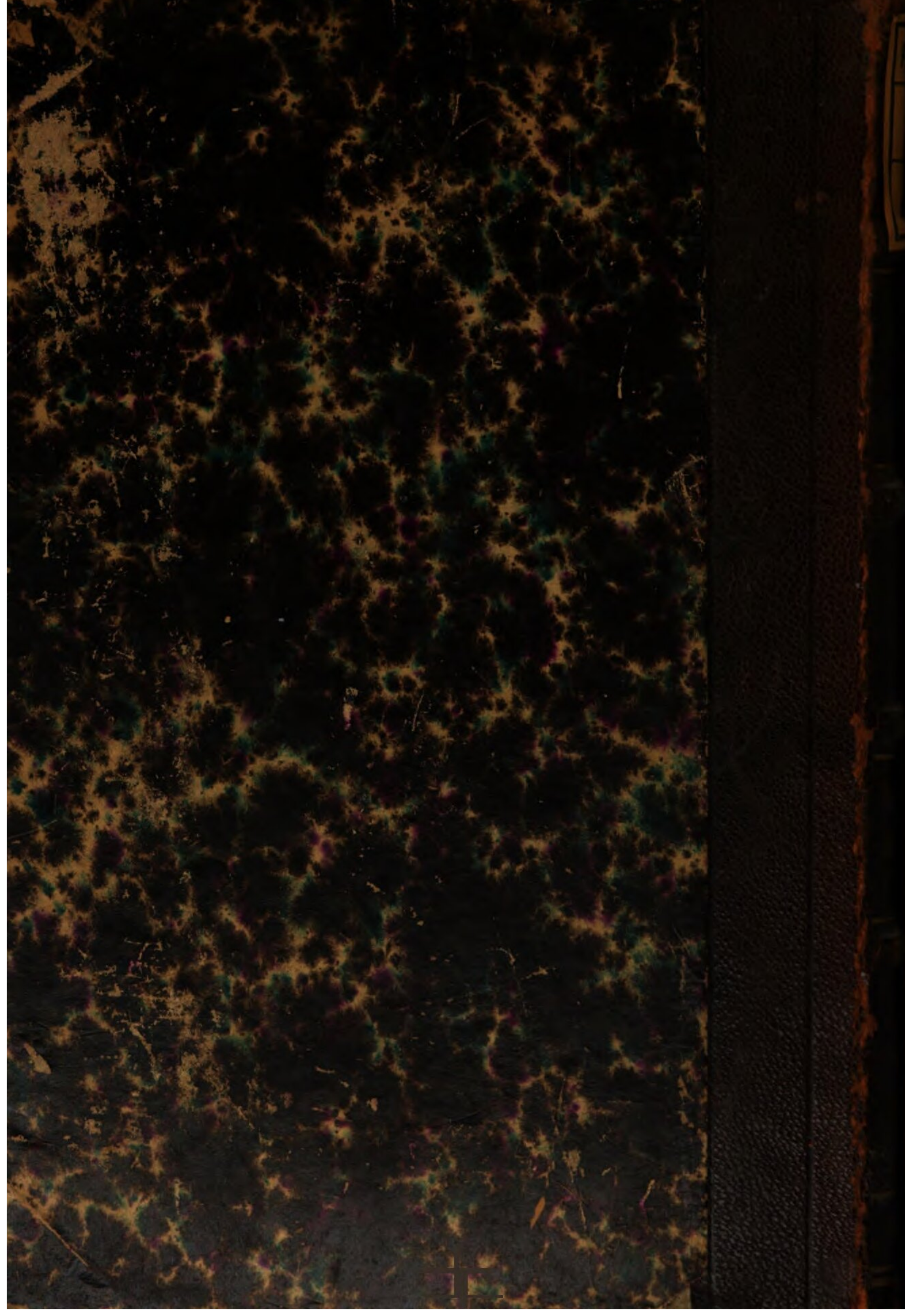
And there's no more to tell. And I thank you, my readers, for your interest in coming with me thus far. It is well to break off when the sky is sunny: better leave sunshine on the memory than storm.

THE END.

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Ledere



F.X.BEER,
k.Hofbuchbinder
MÜNCHEN
Ledererstr.25.



Wood, Henry

Lord Oakburn's daughters

Bd.: 2

Leipzig 1864

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